

**Demi-Gods and
Semi-Devils 2:
Shrouding
Screen in**

Jin Yong

The Demi Gods and Semi Devils

天龍八部

TIAN LONG BA BU

Book 2: Shrouding Screen in Suzhou



Original novel written by Jin Yong
(Louis Cha)

Chapter 11: Crazy All Along

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

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After Duan Yu had his acupoints sealed by Jiumozhi, he was unable to move whatsoever. Jiumozhi's subordinates had tossed him sideways onto the saddle of a horse, facing downwards. All he saw was the ground continuously moving and the hoofs of the horse rising up and down. His mouth and nose were filled with the dirt and dust of the road. He heard his captors loudly shouting, but as they were speaking in a barbaric language that he could not understand, he did not know what they were saying. Counting the number of horse-legs that he could see, all in all there were ten horses.

After galloping for ten or so li, they arrived at a fork in the road. He heard Jiumozhi jabber a few indistinct words. Five horses took the road on the left, whereas Jiumozhi, Duan Yu, and the other horses took the right. After galloping for many more li, they arrived at yet another fork. Once again, they split into two separate groups. Duan Yu knew that Jiumozhi was trying to confuse the pursuing forces and render them uncertain as to in which direction they should chase.

After travelling for another period of time, Jiumozhi leapt off his horse. He retrieved a leather belt and tied it to Duan Yu's waist. Then, supporting Duan Yu's body with his left hand, he began to make his way through the mountain passes on foot. His two remaining servants rode off westwards with all the horses. Duan Yu was secretly anguished. "Uncle must have sent out the heavy cavalry to pursue us by now, but at most they will capture the nine servants of this barbarian monk. They won't be able to rescue me."

Although Jiumozhi was carrying someone in one arm, his steps remained light and easy. He climbed higher and higher. Six hours later, he had passed into a desolate region

of untamed mountains and wild ridges. Duan Yu saw that the sun was setting in the west, and its light continuously came from the left. Jiumozhi was taking them to the north.

At nightfall, Jiumozhi tied his body to a branch on a large tree, using the belt which he had wrapped around Duan Yu's waist earlier. He didn't say a single word to Duan Yu; for the matter, he didn't even glance at him. His back facing Duan Yu, he handed him a few dry flour-biscuits that were used as field rations. He unsealed the acupoints on Duan Yu's upper arm, so as to let him hold the food. Duan Yu secretly extended his left hand, intending to generate his internal energy and use the 'Shaoze Sword' technique to attack him. However, his major acupoints all remained sealed, causing all of his internal energy to be blocked and stifled. His finger stabbed and pointed impotently, without a single bit of power behind it.

Many days passed in such a manner, as Jiumozhi carried him northwards. Duan Yu repeatedly tried to provoke Jiumozhi into speaking, asking why he was being kidnapped and why they were headed north. But Jiumozhi never responded. Duan Yu's belly was full of resentment. He thought to himself that in the past when his little sister Mu Wanqing had captured him, although he suffered quite a bit, he wasn't as bored senseless and depressed as he was right now. Not to mention, being captured by a beautiful girl who smelled wonderful and had a lovely voice even when she was shouting at him, was totally different from being carried by this barbarian monk who pretended to be deaf and dumb. This wasn't even in the same league.

After travelling in such a manner for ten or so days, Duan Yu thought that they had probably left the boundaries of Dali by now. It seemed to him that the direction in which they were travelling changed to be northeast, but they continued to avoid travelling on major roads, continuing to travel through desolate mountain passes. By now though, the terrain became smoother and smoother. The mountain

ridges grew fewer in number, and more sources of running water appeared. In a single day, they would often have to ford multiple rivers. Finally, Jiumozhi bought a pair of horses, splitting them with Duan Yu. But Duan Yu's six major acupoints naturally remained sealed.

Once, when Duan Yu was taking a leak, he thought to himself, "If I exercise the steps of the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves', this barbarian monk wouldn't necessarily be able to follow me, right?" But after taking only two steps, the sealed acupoints prevented his internal energy from flowing through them, and he immediately fell flat on his face. He sighed, then crawled to his feet, knowing that his last hope of escape had just disappeared.

That night, the two made an overnight rest stop at an inn in a small city. Jiumozhi ordered the inn servants to bring him paper, a brush, an inkstick, and an inkstone. He placed it on the table, lit a lamp, then said, "This humble monk has offended you greatly in inviting your illustrious personage to grace me with this visit northwards. I feel deeply apologetic about this." Duan Yu said, "Mmhmm. You are too polite." Jiumozhi asked, "Do you know why I have acted in such a way?"

Duan Yu was thinking about this very subject during the entire trip. After seeing all those things placed on the desk, he guessed about eighty or ninety percent. He replied, "Can't be done." Jiumozhi asked, "What can't be done?" Duan Yu replied, "You envy and covet my family's 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' and want to force me to write it out for you. This just can't be done."

Jiumozhi shook his head. "You misunderstand. In past years, this humble monk made a promise to Mr. Murong that I would borrow your venerable monastery's manuscript and let him peruse it. My inability to fulfill this promise has always weighed heavily on my heart. Fortunately, you have memorized this technique in your heart. Without any other alternatives, I was forced to take you to Mr. Murong's grave

and burn you in sacrifice. In this way, I would finally be able to fulfill my promise. But you, Young Prince, are as a dragon amongst men, and I have no enmity with you whatsoever. How could I dare to harm you? There is a way by which both of us can be satisfied. All you need to do is write out the instructions and draw out the diagrams, without omitting anything at all. I won't take a single peek at it and immediately seal it, then take it to Mr. Murong's tomb and burn it to ashes. After having fulfilled this important wish, I will respectfully escort you back to Dali."

Jiumozhi had said these words before, that day when he had arrived at the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. At the time, Benyin and the others all were inclined to agree, and Duan Yu had also felt that this was acceptable. But afterwards, Jiumozhi had first launched a sneak attack on Emperor Baoding, then kidnapped himself, Duan Yu. He used guileful and deceitful methods to avoid pursuing forces, and showed not a single care at all for the safety and well-being of his nine subordinates. He had clearly revealed his ruthlessness and committed many crimes. How could Duan Yu trust him now? He long ago had decided that the Divine Crocodile and the other three members of the 'Four Great Evils', in openly proclaiming to be evil people, were far superior to this 'holy monk' from Tibet. Although he had very little real-world experience, Duan Yu had already mulled over this matter for the past twenty days or so and understood the critical points. He said, "Master Jiumozhi, you cannot deceive me with these words of yours."

Jiumozhi folded his hands together. "Amitabha. Everything I have done is because of the promise I made previously to Mr. Murong. This should show how highly I value my word. How can I break another promise to fulfill this one?"

Duan Yu shook his head. "No one knows whether or not you really made a promise to Mr. Murong in the past. After getting the manuscript for the 'Divine Sword of the Six

Meridians', you will definitely give it a close read. Who knows if you'll actually take it to Mr. Murong's grave or not, afterwards? Even if you really plan to burn it in sacrifice, based on your intelligence, Great Master, after reading it a few times, you'll have memorized it completely. Maybe, fearing that you might forget or misremember some parts, you'll even make a duplicate copy before incinerating the original."

Jiumozhi's eyes widened greatly, and he fixed Duan Yu with an evil, vicious stare. But in the blink of an eye, the expression on his face turned kind and amiable. He slowly said, "Both of us are disciples of Buddha. How can you say such brash, untrue things? What a sin, what a sin. I'm afraid that I am forced to resort to compelling you a little bit. I do this to save your life. Please don't blame me." As he spoke, he extended the palm of his left hand, gently pressing it against Duan Yu's chest. "When you are unable to withstand the pain and are willing to write out for me, all you need to do is nod and I will immediately release you."

Duan Yu laughed bitterly. "If I don't write the manuscript, you won't be able to bring yourself to kill me, because then you won't be able to obtain it. If I actually do write the manuscript out for you, how could you allow me to remain living? Writing it is equivalent to committing suicide. Master Jiumozhi, I understood this point thirteen days ago."

Jiumozhi let out a sigh. "Buddha, show mercy." He began to generate energy in his palm. He expected that with this stream of internal energy passing into Duan Yu's 'Shanzhong' acupoint, Duan Yu would feel as though thousands of ants were gnawing on his entire body. Even though this little princeling who had been pampered since childhood was keeping a stiff upper lip for the moment, once he suffered the torture of being in a half-dead, half-living state, he would definitely give in. He didn't expect that as soon as he generated his internal energy, it flowed away from him and disappeared. In his startlement, he generated

even more power, but this time, it only disappeared even more quickly, turbulently pouring out of his body. Jiumozhi was extremely shocked. He hurriedly pushed Duan Yu's forehead hard with his right hand. Duan Yu let out an 'Ah!' cry, then fell over on top of the table, the back of his head colliding heavily with the wall.

Jiumozhi knew all along that Duan Yu had learned the 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation' from the Old Freak of Xingxiu, but with one's critical acupoints sealed, no internal-energy techniques should have been executable, regardless of whether it was orthodox or heterodox. How could he have known that when he forcefully inserted his internal energy into Duan Yu's 'Shanzhong' acupoint, it was like that day when Duan Yu was paralyzed, his mouth wide open, and helpless to do anything when the Cinnabar Toad hopped in? It had nothing to do with whether or not Duan Yu's acupoints were sealed or not. Groaning and spluttering, Duan Yu sat up. "You falsely title yourself as an eminent and enlightened monk. Do eminent monks beat people up in such a manner?"

Jiumozhi said in a severe tone, "Who, exactly, taught you this 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation'?" Duan Yu shook his head. "The 'Great Art of Energy Dissipation' is a reckless waste of resources. It is akin to throwing away a thousand pieces of gold rather than keeping it for one's own use. Such a heterodox skill is laughable! Laughable!" Without intending to, he quoted the words written within the jade cave from which he learned the 'Divine Art of the Northern Darkness.'

Jiumozhi did not understand what had happened, but did not dare to touch Duan Yu's body. However, when he had earlier sealed Duan Yu's 'Shenfeng', 'Dazhui', 'Xuanshu', and 'Jingmen' acupoints, he hadn't met with any problems. Jiumozhi thought that this person's martial arts was strange and inconceivably bizarre. It must have been some byproduct or alteration generated by his practice of the

'Single Solitary Finger' and the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. Only, as he had just started to learn this new technique, he still was not very proficient at it. Following this line of thought, he found himself all the more awed by and covetuous of the martial arts learning of Dali's Duan family. He suddenly raised his hand and struck out in the air with a stance from his 'Blazing Sabre', aiming the attack just slightly above Duan Yu's head. He shouted, "You really don't intend to write? If I aimed that strike just one foot lower, what would have happened to your head?"

Duan Yu was extremely afraid. He worried that if Jiumozhi really did get angry and poked out one of his eyes or chopped off one of his arms, what could he do about it? Some words which he had been pondering the entire trip instantly rose to the forefront of his mind, and he automatically said, "If I can't take it anymore, then I'll be forced to write whatever comes to mind, and it won't necessarily be accurate. If you damage my limbs, then I will hate you to the bone and what I write will be even more inaccurate. How about this. The manuscript that I write out, you intend to burn in front of Mr. Murong's tombstone, right? You'll immediately seal it and won't peek at it at all, right? So whether it is accurate or not has nothing to do with you. I'll just write something at random. It will just be me deceiving Mr. Murong's ghost. In the future, after his ghost in the underworld practices what I wrote and fire-deviates, damaging his ghostly meridians, he won't blame you, right?" After saying this, he went to the table, picking up the brush and spreading the paper, preparing to write.

Jiumozhi was extremely angry. With these few words, Duan Yu had torn apart his façade of seeking the manuscript of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' on behalf of Mr. Murong. At the same time, Duan Yu had also made it clear that if he, Jiumozhi, used force to coerce, the 'manual' which Duan Yu would write out would definitely be incomplete and inaccurate. The wrong sentences would be more common

than the right sentences. Not only would the manual be useless, anyone who tried to practice according to its instructions would suffer great harm. In the course of his two battles against the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' at the Heavenly Dragon Monastery, he naturally learned what the real movements of the sword techniques were. But the main essence of the skill lay not in the movements, but purely in the internal energy formulas. There would be no way for him to discern the true instructions from the false instructions for this aspect. He barely managed to avoid flying into an utter rage out of shame, but his anger was too great, and with a 'chi' sound, he struck out with a stroke from the 'Blazing Sabre' and chopped the pen in Duan Yu's hand in half.

Duan Yu began to laugh loudly. Jiumozhi angrily said, "Little bastard, the Buddha is trying to save your life, but you obstinately persist on the wrong path. Looks like the only option is to take you to Mr. Murong's tomb and burn you to death there. The sword techniques which you memorized in your heart cannot be false, am I right?"

Duan Yu laughed, "I suppose that on my deathbed, I'll just have to intentionally misremember a few of the strokes. Right, this is a great idea! From now on, I'll try my best to misremember the technique. The more I misremember it, the better. At the very end, even I will be confused about how it was supposed to go."

Jiumozhi glared furiously at him. It was as though there was a 'Blazing Sabre' in his eyes that was about to burst out. He deeply wanted to simply wave his hand, then strike out with the invisible qi of his 'Blazing Sabre' and chop this little bastard's head off.

After this, they headed eastwards for another twenty days or so. Duan Yu listened to the accents of the other roadside travelers, and felt their speech was soft, elegant, and refined. There were no longer any spices in the food either.

This day, they finally arrived outside the great gates of the city of Suzhou. Duan Yu thought to himself, "We're about

to go to Murong Bo's tombstone now. Since this barbarian monk hasn't gotten the manuscript, he won't actually kill me just yet. But to be placed upon Murong Bo's tomb and be burnt a little, then baked a little, would put me in a half-dead state. That's something to avoid as well." Turning his mind from the subject, he began to check out the scenery. It was March now. Apricot flowers bloomed on both sides of the road, green willows hung over the lake, and a warm spring wind blew against his body. It was an intoxicating, almost giddy feeling. Duan Yu couldn't help but feel his heart calm down and be at peace. Opening his mouth, he recited, "*The waves are vast, and the willows are listening. A lonely village rests on a distant plain of fragrant grass, and the rays of the setting sun glow as apricot flowers fly across the sky.*"

Jiumozhi sneered, "You're at death's door right now, and you still have such aimless, sentimental thoughts in your mind, to the point where you are reciting poems and ballads?" Duan Yu laughed, "Thus spaketh the Buddha: 'Neither the world nor your life is eternal, and that which is not ephemeral is bitter.' Nobody lives forever. At most, one might live a few years longer than others. What's so great about that?"

Jiumozhi ignored him. He asked a passerby for the location of the 'Canhe Manor'. But although he asked seven or eight people, none of them knew; moreover, the language barrier made it even more difficult for them to communicate. The last person he met was an old man who said, "Inside or outside of Suzhou, there isn't a single manor called the 'Canhe Manor'. Master Monk, you must have misheard." Jiumozhi said, "The lord of the manor is surnamed 'Murong'. Might I ask, where does he live?" That old man said, "Within the walls of Gusu, there are those surnamed Gu, Lu, Shen, Zhang, Zhou, Wen...those are all famous manor lords. There's nobody surnamed Murong. Never heard of'm."

Just as Jiumozhi was uncertain as to how to proceed, he overheard a voice from a small eastern alleyway say, "I've heard that the Murong family lives thirty li west of the city, in a place called the Basin of Swallows. Let's go check it out." Another person said, "Right, when we arrive at the edges, we need to be careful." Their accent marked them as being from Henan's central prefecture. The two spoke in a very low voice, but Jiumozhi's cultivation of internal strength was very profound, and he heard their words clearly. He thought to himself, "Can it be that these two are intentionally letting me hear their words? If not, how can there be such a coincidence?" Glancing sideways, he saw that one speaker, dressed in mourning clothes, had a grand, imposing air, whereas the other was small, gaunt, and short, with the appearance of a chronically ill old pickpocket.

Jiumozhi could immediately tell that these two men possessed martial arts. Before he had decided whether or not to go meet with them, Duan Yu already shouted out, "Mr. Huo, Mr. Huo, you came here as well?" That small, sickly looking person was the 'Golden Abacus', Cui Baiquan. The other man was his martial nephew, the 'Soul Pursuing Whip', Guo Yanzhi.

After leaving Dali, the two of them wholeheartedly wished to avenge Ke Baisui. They knew that the Murong family had an extremely high level of martial arts, and that there was less than a ten percent chance of success, but they nonetheless courageously came to Suzhou. After learning that the Murong family lived at the Basin of Swallows, and that Murong Bo had died many years ago, they realized that the person who killed Ke Baisui must be another member of the Murong family. They felt that their chances of gaining revenge had improved somewhat and rushed to the lakeside just as Jiumozhi and Duan Yu passed by.

Cui Baiquan, suddenly hearing Duan Yu call out to him, was stunned. He quickly made his way to him, seeing that Duan Yu was with a mounted monk whose left hand was

gripping the reins of Duan Yu's horse. Duan Yu's arms hung limply at his sides. Clearly, his acupoints had been sealed. He asked curiously, "Young Prince, it's you! Hey, Master Monk, why are you giving this young gentleman a hard time? Don't you know who he is?"

Jiumozhi didn't think very highly of these two men, but he thought to himself that this was the first time he entered Central Plains, and Mr. Murong's home was not easy to find. With these two leading the way, things would be much easier. He said, "I need to go to the Murong family's home, and would like to trouble you two to guide me."

Cui Baiquan replied, "Master Monk, how should I properly address you? Why is it that you dare to offend the young prince of the Duan family? What is your noble purpose for paying a visit to the Murong family's home?" Jiumozhi replied, "You shall know when we arrive." Cui Baiquan replied, "Master Monk, are you a friend of the Murong family?" Jiumozhi replied, "Correct. If you, Mr. Huo, know the location of Mr. Murong's Canhe Manor, I'll like to ask you to lead me there." Jiumozhi heard Duan Yu address this man as 'Mr. Huo', and actually thought his surname was 'Huo'. Cui Baiquan scratched his head. He said to Duan Yu, "Prince, let me unseal the acupoints on your arm first." As he spoke, he took a few steps forward and stretched out his hand, planning to unseal Duan Yu's acupoints.

Duan Yu thought to himself that Jiumozhi's proficiency in martial arts was extremely high, and that there was perhaps no one superior to him in all the world. Cui and Guo definitely would not be able to defeat him. If they made a rash attempt at rescuing him, the only result would be two more deaths. It would be best to tell the two of them to escape as quickly as possible. He said, "Wait! This master monk defeated my uncle and five other elite fighters of Dali by himself, then took me captive. He is an extremely close bosom friend of Mr. Murong, and intends to burn me as a sacrifice to Mr. Murong on the altar of his tomb. The two of

you don't have anything to do with Gusu's Murong family. It'd be best if you hurried away and left."

Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi, hearing that this monk had defeated the likes of experts such as Emperor Baoding, felt great shock in their hearts. After hearing that he was a bosom friend of the Murong family, they only felt even more trepidation. But Cui Baiquan also thought to himself that he had hid himself at the South-Subduing Palace for more than ten years. Today, when the young prince was in peril, how could he just look on with folded arms? They had already arrived at Suzhou. He had long since regarded his own life as expendable, since going on this voyage of revenge. There was no difference between dying to enemy abacus beads and dying at the hands of this man. He immediately placed his hand in his bosom, withdrawing a magnificent golden abacus. Raising it high in the air, he shook it, creating many clanking sounds. "Master Monk, Mr. Murong is a good friend of yours, but this young prince is a good friend of mine. I urge you to let him go." With the flick of his hand, Guo Yanzhi also drew the soft whip from his waist. The two of them simultaneously rushed towards Jiumozhi's horse.

Duan Yu loudly shouted, "You two, hurry and leave! You can't defeat him!"

Jiumozhi laughed dully. "You really want to fight?" Cui Baiquan replied, "This is what is known as a mosquito attacking a tiger on its head. I know that I cannot beat you, but I still need to try. Life and death-ow, ow!"

Before he finished the sentence, Jiumozhi had already reached out and seized Guo Yanzhi's soft whip. Then, with a clapping sound, he reversed the whip and wrapped it around Cui Baiquan's golden abacus. With a powerful tug of the whip, he ripped both weapons out of their owner's hands and sent them flying towards the right, into the lake. Jiumozhi had calculated his use of energy perfectly. Just as it seemed as though the two weapons were about to sink into the depths of the lake, the tip of the whip floated up and

wrapped around a willow that was overhanging the lake. The willow branch was soft and supple. It continuously rose and fell in a wave-like motion. The golden abacus slowly slapped against the surface of the water, creating one gentle ripple after another.

Jiumozhi folded his hands together. "Gentlemen, I'll have to trouble you to lead the way, please." The two of them stared at each other, not knowing what to do. Jiumozhi added, "If the two of you are unwilling to guide us, then I'd like for you to instruct me as to how to get to the Basin of the Swallows, and allow me to search for it on my own." Seeing how awe-inspiring his martial arts was, but how mild his countenance was, the two of them felt that it wouldn't be appropriate to become hostile against him, but it wouldn't be appropriate not to either.

Just at this moment, a rowing sound was heard, and a small boat appeared on the lake. A young maiden in green was holding a pair of oars and slowly paddling towards them. She was singing a little ditty as she rowed. *"The fragrance of lotus blossoms fills the lake, and a playful young girl tarries picking the flowers. At night, she brings her boat to the beach to play in the water. Laughing, she removes her red skirt and drapes it over the ducks."* The sound of the song was incomparably tender and sweet, joyous and pleasing to one's senses.

In Dali, Duan Yu often chanted the poems and essays of the ancients, and long since understood the people and the songs of Jiangnan [South of the (Yangtze) River]. Now, listening to this song, he couldn't help but feel intoxicated by it. He saw that the girl had a pair of delicate hands, with skin as white and luminous as jade. Her reflection could be seen in the green waves, which seemed almost transparent. Even Guo Yanzhi and Cui Baiquan, who were on the verge of confronting a powerful enemy, couldn't help but turn their heads and take a glance at her.

Only Jiumozhi ignored her. He said, "Since you two are unwilling to inform me where Canhe Manor is located then I must bid you farewell."

At this time, the girl in the boat had already reached the shore. Hearing Jiumozhi's words, she replied, "Master Monk, you are going to Canhe Manor? Might I ask what business you have there?" Her voice was extremely sweet and very clear, causing listeners to feel unspeakably comfortable. This girl was around sixteen or seventeen years of age, with a gentle, soft face and a delicate body.

Duan Yu thought to himself, "I never would have imagined that the girls of Jiangnan were this beautiful." Actually, this girl wasn't really all that beautiful. She couldn't compare to Mu Wanning. But even though on a ten-point scale, she might only rank an eight in appearance, she ranked twelve in terms of gentleness and softness. Thus, she was not one whit inferior to perfect beauties.

Jiumozhi said, "This humble monk desires to visit the Canhe Manor. Can you point me in its direction, Miss?" The maiden smiled slightly. "The name, 'Canhe Manor', is not known to outsiders. Master Monk, where did you hear it from?" Jiumozhi replied, "I am an old bosom friend of Mr. Murong in a distant land. I have come for the sole purpose of paying my respects before his tomb, and carry out an agreement of the past. I hope to inquire as to the location of Young Master Murong, his son, as well." The maiden mumbled to herself, "Such an unfortunate coincidence, hey! Young Master Murong went on a journey the day before yesterday. If you came just three days earlier, you would have met him, hey." Jiumozhi said, "For me not to be able to meet the young master is a source of great sorrow. But I have come travelled tens of thousands of li from Tibet to come to Central Plains. I would like to pay my respects before Mr. Murong's tomb, and also fulfill my previous agreement with him." The maiden said, "Master, as you are a friend of Old Master Murong, please take a cup of green tea

first. Meanwhile, I will go deliver the news. Whatcha think?" Jiumozhi replied, "Miss, what is your position within the young master's residence? How should I address you?"

The maiden smiled sweetly. "Aww, I'm just a minor servant girl who takes care of the Young Master, playing the zither and the flute for him. I'm called Ah Bi. Don't be so polite and call me 'miss' this and 'lady' that. Just go ahead and call me Ah Bi, hey?" Her voice was filled with a heavy Suzhou accent. Originally, it was difficult to understand her words, but as she was a servant of an aristocratic wulin family, she had heard a great deal of Mandarin, and so she added a lot of Mandarin phrases and words into her speech. With a bit of effort, Duan Yu, Jiumozhi, and the others could manage to somewhat understand her. Jiumozhi immediately said, in a respectful tone, "I wouldn't dare." (Author's note: The Wu dialect which Ah Bi spoke cannot be reproduced in a book; only some of its charm can be conveyed. If her dialogue was actually written in the Wu dialect, readers wouldn't be able to understand her at all. It wasn't easy for Duan Yu and Jiumozhi to understand her.)

Ah Bi said, "From here to the Pavilion of Zither Melodies of the Basin of Swallows is all water. If all of you want to go there, I can row you over. Is that alright?" Her words, 'Is that alright', were eagerly solicitous, soft in its inquiring, making it difficult for others to refuse her.

Jiumozhi replied, "If that's the case, then thank you for your labors." Dragging Duan Yu by the hand, he easily leapt into the boat. The small boat barely dipped downwards, and did not shake or sway in the slightest. Ah Bi smiled a little towards Duan Yu and Jiumozhi, as if to say, "Nice abilities!"

Guo Yanzhi said in a low voice, "Martial-uncle, what?..." The two of them came to seek revenge on the Murong family, but now were in a very difficult and awkward position.

Ah Bi laughed a little. "Gentlesirs, why dontcha come? Since you've already come to Suzhou, hey, if you don't have

any pressing business, why dontcha come over to our place to drink some tea and eat something? Don't be worried about the boat being small; even if more people came, it still wouldn't sink." She gently paddled the boat, approaching the willow tree. Extending her delicate hand, she retrieved the golden abacus and the soft whip. She casually played with the abacus a bit, striking it and causing a series of clanging sounds.

After listening for just a brief moment, Duan Yu delightedly said, "Miss, you are playing the song, 'Gathering Mulberries', right?" As it were, when she started to play with the abacus, her fingers danced across it both quickly and slowly, with force and gently. She used a rhythm that was amazingly two strains from the gentle, easy song, 'Gathering Mulberries'. Ah Bi smiled beautifully. "Young Master, you have a thorough understanding of music. Why don't you come play a melody as well?" Duan Yu saw that she was innocent, friendly, and unpretentious. Smiling, he said, "I don't know how to play the abacus." Turning his head, he said to Cui Baiquan, "Mr. Huo, this young miss is beating out such a lovely melody on your abacus."

Cui Baiquan forced out a smile. "That's so, that's so. This young lady really is a proper person. Even such a vulgar object as this possession of mine becomes a musical instrument in her hands." Ah Bi said, "Aww, I'm very sorry, yeah? Does this belong to Mr. Huo? This abacus is made exquisitely. You must have a lot of money at home. Even your abacus is made out of gold! Uncle Huo, lemme give it back to ya." Holding the abacus in her left hand, she stretched her arm out towards him, but Cui Baiquan was on the shore and unable to receive it. He really could not bear to part with this old friend of his, which had never left his side for an instant in many years. With a leap, he too jumped into the boat, stretching out his arm and receiving the abacus. Leaning his head slightly, he shot a glance at

Jiumozhi. A gentle, amiable smile was on Jiumozhi's face the entire time, without the slightest hint of anger.

With her left hand, Ah Bi held the tip of the whip, using the five fingers of her right hand to strap the other end around her hand. She scratched the whip with her fingernail, instantly creating a series of crystal clear 'ding', 'ling', 'dong', 'long' sounds. It was as though she were testing out a new pipa instrument. A weapon which had done battle all across the land, competing against both heroes and villains, once more became a musical instrument in her tender, pure white hands.

Duan Yu cried out, "Brilliant, brilliant! Miss, why don't you play a song for him?" Ah Bi said to Guo Yanzhi, "Does this soft whip belong to you, sir? I very rudely toyed around with a bit. I'm so very sorry. Why don't you come on the boat as well? In a bit, I'll peel some fresh crimson water chestnuts for you to eat." Guo Yanzhi held a deep and abiding hatred for the entire Murong family for the death of his master. But seeing this innocent, unaffected maiden speak and smile so sweetly, he couldn't release upon her the anger and hatred he felt. He thought to himself, "Since she's invited me onto the boat, I might as well go. At the very least, I'll kill some of their people and so avenge my benevolent master's death." He immediately nodded and also jumped onto the boat.

Ah Bi carefully coiled up the soft whip, then handed it to Guo Yanzhi. Pulling at the oars, the boat began to move westwards.

Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi exchanged a few glances. They thought to themselves, "Today, we are entering a tiger's den. Who knows if we will live or die? The Murong family's techniques are very sinister and deadly. This girl appears to be gentle, kind, and sweet; she doesn't seem to be putting on an act. But who knows if this is a trick by which the Murong family uses to deceive their enemies? After we lower our guard, perhaps they will make their move."

The boat glided across the waters. After making several turns, they arrived at a particularly large lake. As far as the eye could see, mist covered the surface of the water, which stretched out unendingly in every direction. Guo Yanzhi was secretly apprehensive. "This large lake is probably Lake Taihu, the Grand Lake. Neither I nor martial-uncle Cui know how to swim. All this little girl needs to do is overturn the boat, and the two of us will become food for the turtles and the fish. How could we possibly gain vengeance?" Cui Baiquan had thought of the same thing. He decided that if he could get his hands on the oars, it wouldn't be an easy task for the girl to overturn the boat even if she wanted to. He said, "Miss, let me help you row the boat. Just tell me what direction we should go." Ah Bi smiled. "Aww, I would not dare! If the young master found out, he'd berate me for slighting our guests." Seeing that she was unwilling, Cui Baiquan became all the more suspicious. He laughed, "To tell you the truth, we want to hear you, Young Miss, display your consummate skills in playing songs on the soft whip. We are unrefined people, but Young Master Duan here is a thorough expert in music, chess, calligraphy, and painting."

Ah Bi glanced at Duan Yu. She laughed, "My playing is so poor, how can it be considered a consummate skill? This young gentleman appears to be very refined. He'll laugh'n'laugh'n'laugh some more. I ain't gonna!"

Cui Baiquan took the soft whip from Guo Yanzhi and put it in her hands. "Play, play!" At the same time, he took the wooden oar from her hands. Ah Bi laughed. "Alrighty! Could you lend me your golden abacus again as well?" Cui Baiquan felt extremely apprehensive. "Can it be that she has some underhanded plot in taking both of our weapons?" But at this point in time, he could not credibly refuse, and could only hand the abacus over to her. Ah Bi put the golden abacus on a wooden plank in front of her. She held the handle of the soft whip in her left hand, then gently stepped on the tip of the whip with her left foot, pulling it taut. The

five fingers of her right hand plucked rapidly in succession, immediately generating a tinkling sound from the soft whip. Although the sound wasn't as clear and strong as that of a pipa instrument, it was still very bright and crisp nonetheless.

While she was playing the soft whip with the five fingers of her right hand, she managed to simultaneously stretch her fingers out and play with the golden abacus. The clanging sound of the abacus beads, when combined with the tinkling sounds from the soft whip, became even more clear in their harmonizing. Just at this moment, a pair of swallows flit past them overhead, heading westwards. Duan Yu thought to himself, "The Murong family lives at the 'Basin of Swallows'. I would imagine there must be many swallows here."

Ah Bi began to sing. *"Two divinities appear at an auspicious hour, and a thousand families once more see the graceful dancing of a pair of swallows. The nest of the phoenix is certainly near, for why else does the river mist follow us even now? As messy as a rich lady's boudoir, flying low over the green shores, drawing a picture with gentle strokes, singing a song of the turning of this world. For whom do I come, and for whom do I depart? My master's benevolence is as priceless as a string of pearls."*

Hearing how graceful and supple her voice was, Duan Yu couldn't help but be moved. He thought to himself, "If I stayed in the southern lands of Dali all of my life, how could I have heard such a celestial melody? 'For whom do I come, and for whom do I depart? My master's benevolence is as priceless as a string of pearls.' Young lord Murong must be an extraordinary person to have a servant girl such as her."

After finishing her song, she returned the soft whip and abacus to Cui and Guo. She laughed, "Please don't mock me for my poor singing. Master Huo, just paddle towards the small harbor to our right!"

Cui Baiquan felt relieved after she returned their weapons to her. He immediately complied and paddled the boat towards the harbor. The surface of the water was covered with water lotuses. If it hadn't been for her guidance, he never would have discovered that there was a way in. After paddling for a while longer, Ah Bi said, "Paddle in that direction, please." Here, the surface of the water was covered with water chestnut leaves. The crimson water chestnuts surged up and down with the waves, forming a stupendously colorful sight. Ah Bi casually plucked a few of the water chestnuts out from the water and offered some to each person.

Although Duan Yu could move his arms, after having his major acupoints sealed, he couldn't exert the slightest bit of strength. He couldn't even peel the chestnut. Ah Bi laughed. "Young Gentleman, you aren't from Jiangnan and you don't know how to peel chestnuts. Lemme help ya!" She peeled many chestnuts in a row and placed them in his palm. Duan Yu saw that the skin of the chestnuts looked bright and clean, and put them in his mouth. They tasted savory, crisp, and outstandingly sweet and clear. He laughed, "The tastes of these chestnuts are clear and not dirty at all, just like the song you sang, Miss." Ah Bi's blushed slightly. She laughed, "This is the first time I've heard anyone compare my singing to these water chestnuts. Many thanks!"

Before they finished paddling past the pool of water chestnuts, Ah Bi directed them to make another course change, having the small boat pass through a pond of reeds and wild rice. By now, even Jiumozhi was beginning to feel suspicious. He secretly began memorizing the twists and turns they made, so as to not get lost on his way out. But as he stared at the lake, all the water chestnuts, lotus leaves, and reeds looked identical. Moreover, once the wind blew, the shape and configuration of the chestnuts and leaves would suddenly change. Even if he really did memorize how everything looked, in a blink of an eye it all would look

differently. Jiumozhi, Guo Yanzhi, and Cui Baiquan continuously cast side-glances at Ah Bi, trying to discern from her eyes how she was managing to discern where they should go. But all she did was cheerfully and carelessly pick chestnuts and play with the water before casually pointing out where they should go next. It was as though these countless complex interlocking channels, which were almost like a chessboard, were as familiar to her as the lines on the palm of her hand, something which she knew since birth and had no need to memorize.

And so, twisting and curving, they paddled for almost four hours. Off in the distance, green willows could be seen growing thickly, revealing a corner of upturned eaves. Ah Bi said, "Go there! Master Huo! You must be tired, after helping me row for half a day!" Cui Baiquan smiled wryly. "As long as there are red water chestnuts to eat and beautiful songs to hear, even if I rowed for another eight or ten years, I wouldn't be tired." Ah Bi clapped her hands and laughed. "You just wanna listen to songs and eat chestnuts? Easy breezy! Just don't leave this lake for the rest of your life, yeah!"

Hearing her say the words, 'Don't leave this lake for the rest of your life, yeah', Cui Baiquan couldn't help but feel startled. He cast her a side glance, but saw her smiling cheerfully, without any malicious undercurrent at all. Still, he couldn't help but continue to feel uneasy. Ah Bi took over the wooden paddle, and begin to row them towards the copse of willows. A large pine tree branch, carved into the shape of a ladder, touched the water's surface. Ah Bi fastened the boat to the branch. The melodious call of little birds could be heard above them. Imitating the sound of the birds, Ah Bi also let out a few calls, before turning and laughing, "Please come ashore."

As they left the boat, four or five rooms could be seen, scattered alongside the river and constructed upon an area that seemed like an island or a peninsula. The rooms were

small and exquisitely constructed, appearing very refined and proper. Above the house was a plaque with two words written on it: "Zither Melody". The calligraphy of the plaque was extremely natural and unrestrained. Jiumozhi said, "Would this place be the Canhe Manor of the Basin of Swallows?" Ah Bi shook her head. "No. This is the place which the young master has given us to live in. It's a very small place and totally unsuitable for receiving guests. But you, Master Monk, said that you wanted to visit the mausoleum of Old Master Murong. This is something which I don't have the authority to allow. Please wait here for a bit while I go and consult with my elder sister, Ah Zhu.

Listening to her words, Jiumozhi felt unhappy and his face sunk. He was the national protector and dharma king of Tibet, an extremely venerated and respected personage. Not only was he greatly respected and honored in Tibet, if he were to pay a visit to the imperial courts of the Great Song, Dali, or the Western Xia, the monarchs of each kingdom would personally receive him with great courtesy and propriety. Moreover, he was a bosom friend of Mr. Murong and personally came to pay his respects to him. Since Young Master Murong was unaware of this, he could not be blamed for leaving. But for this underling to not invite him to the main hall and receive him with proper ceremony and instead take him to the living quarters of the servants was simply too infuriating. But, seeing the smiles and laughter on Ah Bi's face, it didn't seem as though she had the slightest intention of disrespecting him. He thought to himself, "This little girl doesn't know anything. Why should I lower myself to be bothered by her?" After this thought, he became calm and good-tempered again.

Cui Baiquan asked, "Who is this elder Sister Ah Zhu of yours?" Ah Bi smiled, "Ah Zhu is simply Ah Zhu. She's a month older than me, so puts on the air of being my elder sister. I don't have the option to not call her elder sister, since she's a month older than me after all. But you don't

need to call her elder Sister Ah Zhu, because if you do, she'll become all the more giddy and happy." As she chirped and tittered in her gentle, clear voice, she led the four of them into the house.

Arriving within the main hall, Ah Bi bade them to sit. A male servant served them green tea and pastries. Duan Yu, holding the teacup in his hand, smelled a fragrant, aromatic scent. He removed the lid on his teacup and saw extremely fine grains of jade-green tea leaves floating on top of the tea. They appeared almost like little pearls rolled into slender hairs. Duan Yu had never seen anything like them before. Taking a sip, he felt as though his mouth was filled with a delicate fragrance which soaked into his tongue and his saliva. Jiumozhi, Cui, and Guo, seeing how strange the tea looked, did not dare to drink. These pearl-shaped tea leaves were a special local product grown in mountain peaks nearby Lake Taihu. Later generations gave it the name, "Bi Luo Chun" tea, meaning "Jade-Green Spirals of Spring". During the Northern Song dynasty, it didn't have such a refined, elegant name yet. The local people called it "Xia Sha Ren Xiang", or "Extremely Scary Fragrance." This was supposed to mean that the tea was so fragrant and rapturous, it would scare people who tasted it. Jiumozhi had always resided in the western regions and in Tibet, and was used to drinking bitter-tasting black brick tea. Now, seeing this jade-green tea that had hair-like things in it, he couldn't help but suspect it was poisoned.

Four different types of light refreshments were served. Rose pine nut candies, soft fuling [a type of edible fungus] cakes, jade green sweetcakes, and dumplings filled with ham and powdered lotus. Each pastry appeared elegant and was properly made, appearing so lovely that they appeared as though they weren't meant to be eaten, but toys to look at and play with instead.

Duan Yu praised, "These delicacies are so delightfully made that they must taste wonderful as well. But how can

anyone bear to eat them?" Ah Bi smiled a little. "Young gentleman, please feel free to eat. We have more." Duan Yu began to eat, and each time he ate one, he would praise it. Jiumozhi, Cui, and Guo still did not dare to eat. Duan Yu felt some suspicion in his heart. "This Jiumozhi fellow claims to be an old friend of Murong Bo. Why is he afraid to eat? Moreover, it doesn't appear as though they are very hospitable in welcoming him either."

Jiumozhi's patience was truly impressive. He waited until after Duan Yu had eaten all the dishes, tasted all the tea, and praised everything profusely before saying, "Miss, can you please go and inform your elder sister, Ah Zhu?"

Ah Bi smiled. "Ah Zhu's hamlet is four-nines away by water. We won't be able to make it there tonight. The four of you, please take a rest here tonight, and tomorrow morning we will go to the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds'." Cui Baiquan asked, "What do you mean by 'four nines away'?" Ah Bi replied, "A 'nine-waterway' is nine li in length, two are eighteen li, and four would be thirty six li. Just use your abacus and you'll be able to calculate it." As it turned out, in the Jiangnan region, when people discussed the distance of a journey or a road, they counted them by 'one-nine' and 'two-nines'.

Jiumozhi said, "Miss, if this is the case, why didn't you take us directly to the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds'? Wouldn't that have been quicker?" Ah Bi laughed. "No one ever comes here to chat and gossip with me. I'm so bored, y'know? Finally, some guests came over, isn't that great? No matter what, I gotta get y'all to stay here a night, yeah?"

All this time, Guo Yanzhi was controlling his temper and not speaking. Now, he suddenly rose to his feet and shouted, "Where do the family members of the Murong family live? I, Guo Yanzhi, did not come to the Canhe Manor to drink tea or eat delicacies, much less to serve as a diversion for you to relieve your boredom. I came here on a mission of killing and

vengeance, to bleed and to die. Since I, the one surnamed Guo, came here, I had no intentions of leaving. Miss, please go convey the word that I am the disciples of Ke Baisui, of the 'Hidden Ox' sect, and have come to avenge my master!" After he spoke, he flashed his whip. With a cracking sound, a red sandalwood tea table and a mottled bamboo chair were shattered into many pieces. Ah Bi seemed neither startled nor angry. She said, "There's plenty of heroes and valiant men who have come to visit the Young Master, at least several every month. Lots of those respected sirs came with such tyrannical, angry, and ferocious attitudes, but this little girl hasn't heard of..."

Before she finished her words, an old person with silver hair and a grey beard walked out holding a walking stick. This person said, "Ah Bi, who is kicking up such a ruckus out here?" This person was speaking in perfect, pure, unaccented Mandarin.

Cui Baiquan rose up from the chair, and both he and Guo Yanzhi stood straight and erect. He shouted, "In whose hands, exactly, did my martial-brother Ke Baisui perish?"

Duan Yu saw that this old person was hunched over, with a face full of wrinkles. If he wasn't ninety, he had to be at least eighty. He said in hoarse voice, "Ke Baisui, Ke Baisui, right. A man a hundred years of age should've died long ago!" [Baisui, his name, literally means 'a hundred years old'; this is a play on words.]

Ever since Guo Yanzhi arrived at Suzhou, his every waking moment was consumed with the thought of going to the Murong family and getting into a big battle, with lots of killing and chopping to avenge his master. But, after Jiumozhi took his weapon away from him, his drive was snapped. Then, after meeting such an innocent, lovely lass as Ah Bi, he was unable to vent his anger out on her. Now, hearing that old man speak so rudely, he lashed out with his soft whip to strike the old man on the back of his heart. He saw that Jiumozhi was seated at the west seat of honor. In

order to prevent him from helping out, Guo Yanzhi launched this attack of his from the east.

He didn't imagine that Jiumozhi would stretch out his arm and pull the whip towards him from far away, as though by magnetic force. He said, "Hero Guo, we have come from afar and are guests. If there's anything you have to say, just say it. There's no need to use force." He rolled the soft whip into a coil, then returned the weapon to him.

Guo Yanzhi's face was suffused with red. It wouldn't be good for him to refuse, but it would also be embarrassing for him to accept. After a moment, he thought to himself, "Today, the most important thing is avenging my master. I can suffer some momentary humiliation in order to keep my weapon in my hands." He reached out and accepted it.

Jiumozhi said to the old man, "Elder Benefactor, might I inquire as to what is your respected name? Are you a relative of Mr. Murong, or a friend?" The old man cracked a smile. "This old fellow is an old servant of the master. What 'respected name' might I have? I heard that you, Great Master, are a dear friend of our passed away master. Might I ask what instructions you have for me?" Jiumozhi replied, "My business can only be divulged to the young master himself." The old man said, "That's unfortunate. The young master left just two days ago. No one knows when he will be back." Jiumozhi asked, "Where did the young master go?" The old man inclined his head, then stretched out with a hand and knocked on his forehead. "As to this, I'm old and muddle-headed. I think he said he was going to the Western Xia. He also said something about the kingdom of Liao, and maybe Tibet as well. Or it could be Dali."

After hearing this, Jiumozhi felt displeasure in his heart. During this era, the world was divided into five nations. Aside from the nation of the Great Song where they currently were, this old man had named all four of the other countries as possible locations. He knew that this old man was only pretending to be muddle-headed. He said, "Since

this is so, I won't wait for the young master to return. Old Steward, I'd like to ask that I be taken directly to Mr. Murong's mausoleum to pay my respects, and give thanks for our old friendship." That old man's hands waved violently. "I can't make this decision on my own, and I'm not the steward."

Jiumozhi asked, "Then who is the steward of your venerable manor? Please invite him out for us to meet." That old man nodded repeatedly. "Great, great! Let me go invite the steward." Turning around, he shuffled his way out while mumbling to himself, "In this day and age, there's all sorts of bad people in the world. They dress up as monks and Taoists and beg for alms. What haven't I seen? I won't be tricked!"

Duan Yu burst out in laughter. Ah Bi hurriedly said to Jiumozhi, "Great Master, please don't be angry, old Uncle Huang is an old muddle-head. He thinks he's very clever, but whenever he speaks he can't help but offend people."

Cui Baiquan tugged on Guo Yanzhi's shirt-sleeves. Walking to one side, he said in a low voice, "This evil baldy claims to be an old friend of Mr. Murong, but these people here clearly are not treating him like a respected guest. Let's not act too rashly and figure out exactly what is going on first." Guo Yanzhi replied, "Yes!" They returned to their original seats. But Guo Yanzhi's original seat had already been shattered by him into many pieces, leaving him no place to sit. Ah Bi carried her own seat over towards him. She said with a smile, "Great Hero Guo, please sit!" Guo Yanzhi nodded. He thought to himself, "Even if I am able to totally eradicate the entirety of the Murong family, I must spare this little girl."

Ever since that old man entered, Duan Yu felt that something was off and unnatural. But as to what exactly was wrong, he could not say. He carefully examined the pavilion's furnishings, furniture, scenery, calligraphy and paintings hanging on the walls, then looked at Ah Bi, Jiumozhi, Cui Baiquan, and Guo Yanzhi. He couldn't find

anything out of the ordinary, but more and more he felt as though something was off.

After a long time passed, the sound of footsteps could be heard, and a thin old man of fifty years or so entered. His skin was sallow in color, and a straggly mountain-goat like beard could be seen on his chin. He looked extremely shrewd and capable. The clothes he wore were very tasteful. On one hand, he wore a marble ring. Evidently, this was the steward for the Murong family. The skinny fellow bowed towards Jiumozhi and said, "This humble servant, Sun San, pays his respects to everyone. We feel extremely honored, venerable sir, that you wish to pay your respects before the mausoleum of our late master. But with our young master having left, there is no one to welcome you properly, much to our shame. I will simply convey your kind intentions to our Young Master, once he returns."

At this point, Duan Yu suddenly smelled a light fragrant scent. His heart swayed. "Strange, strange."

Earlier, when that old male servant had come to the room, Duan Yu smelled a fragrant scent. The fragrance seemed vaguely familiar to the scent which Mu Wanqing's body also had. Although it was very different, both were feminine smells. Originally, Duan Yu thought that this fragrance was coming from Ah Bi, and so did not think too much of it. But as soon as that old servant left the room, the fragrance disappeared. But as soon as the self-claimed 'Sun San' entered the room, Duan Yu once again smelled this scent. Duan Yu suddenly understood that the reason he felt awkward earlier was because he smelled the fragrant scent of a seventeen, eighteen year old girl on the body of an eighty, ninety year old man. He thought to himself, "Can it be that in the inner pavilion is grown some sort of strange flowers or remarkable grass, and so anyone who comes here from that pavilion is covered by that scent? The other possibility is that both that old servant and this skinny fellow are actually women in disguise."

Although the scent made Duan Yu feel suspicious, it was very light and nearly unnoticeable. Jiumozhi and the other two didn't smell the fragrance at all. The only reason Duan Yu himself was able to notice it was because he and Mu Wanqing underwent a rare life-and-death situation together at the mountain cliff. Nobody else would pay any attention to this faint, virginal smell, but to him this scent made a deep impression within his heart and his very bones. It was a much stronger scent to him than that of musk, white sandalwood, or flowery perfume. Although Jiumozhi possessed an extremely deep reservoir of internal energy, he had strictly followed Buddhist prohibitions against sexual encounters all his life. Rosy cheeks and verdant temples were nothing more to him than skeletal bones and colorless skulls. Fragrant powders and rouge were even less to him. He had no idea that men and women had different scents.

Although Duan Yu suspected that Sun San was actually a woman in disguise, he couldn't spot a single flaw or giveaway. Not only did this person have the bearing and demeanor of a man, his shape and his voice weren't womanly at all. Suddenly, he thought to himself, "If a woman is imitating a man, she can't fake his Adam's apple." He secretly glanced at Sun San's throat, but saw that his goat-like beard perfectly covered his larynx. Duan Yu rose to his feet. He pretended to examine the calligraphy and painting on the walls, and casually strolled past Sun San's side. He snuck a side-glance, and saw that Sun San's throat didn't have the slightest bulge at all, and that his chest seemed full and plump. Although Duan Yu still couldn't be absolutely certain that Sun San was a woman, such a skinny man definitely should not have so much flesh and muscle on his chest. Duan Yu, having discovered a secret, felt very amused. "There's a lot more to be played out in this drama. Let's see what she has planned next."

Jiumozhi sighed, "I met with your deceased master by the boundaries of Sichuan. We discussed martial arts and very

much admired each other's abilities, and became friends. I wouldn't have imagined that the heavens themselves would be envious of his talents and leave such a useless, mediocre fellow as myself alive, while taking the life of your deceased master and sending him to meet Buddha in the Western Paradise. The only reason I have left Tibet and come to Central Plains is to pay my respects before his mausoleum, due to our ancient friendship. It does not matter whether or not someone is here to welcome me properly. Steward, I would simply like to trouble you to lead the way." Sun San wrinkled his forehead, as though he felt extremely awkward. "This...this..." Jiumozhi said, "I don't know if there is some difficulty in my request, and humbly request your instruction."

Sun San said, "Great Master, since you are a bosom friend of my deceased master, you surely must know his temperament. My deceased master hated when people come to pay visits to him. He said that of those visitors who came to the manor, if they didn't come on a mission of vengeance, then they came to try and convince him to take them on as a student. A level below this would be those who came to beg for money, or try to cause trouble and pilfer something from us. He said that monks and nuns were even less trustworthy...ack, sorry!" As he said this, he suddenly seemed to realize that with these words, he must have offended Jiumozhi. He hurriedly pressed his hands over his mouth.

The manner in which she acted was totally in accordance with that of a young maiden. Her round eyes widened, and the black pupils of her eyes spun. Although she quickly drooped her eyelids down, Duan Yu, who was paying close attention, couldn't help but feel a sense of glee. "Not only is Sun San female, she's a young girl." Casting a side-glance at Ah Bi, he noticed a trace of a sly smile tugging at the corner of her lips. He no longer had any more doubt in his heart.

“Sun San and old Huang clearly are the same person, perhaps that Sister Ah Zhu she was speaking about.”

Jiumozhi heaved a sigh. “In this world, there are more deceitful people than there are honest people. It is not unreasonable for Mr. Murong to refuse to meet with most folk.” Sun San said, “Right. Our deceased master’s last words were, ‘If anyone wishes to conduct memorial ceremonies at my tomb or sweep my grave, politely turn them away. Hmph, those evil baldies probably just want to dig into my tomb.’ Ack, Great Master, please don’t think too much. The ‘thieving baldies’ our deceased master spoke of probably was not you.”

Duan Yu was secretly amused. “The phrase, ‘Cursing about ‘evil baldies’ in front of a monk’ applies to this situation perfectly.” Then he thought, “This evil baldy has totally maintained his composure and not batted an eyelid. The more evil and loathsome a person is, the better his temper is. This evil baldy really is a remarkable person.”

Jiumozhi said, “These last words of your deceased master are understandable. His might shook the world, and he left behind many enemies. It’s reasonable for him to guard against enemies who did not dare attempt revenge on him when he was living, but who would try to disturb his bones after his death.”

Sun San said, “If someone wishes to disturb the bones of our deceased master, haha, that would really be like ‘an elderly cat smelling salted fish.’” Jiumozhi was startled. “What do you mean, ‘an elderly cat smelling salted fish’?” Sun San replied, “This is called, ‘smelling dried fish, smelling dried fish’. Meaning, ‘don’t even think about it, don’t even think about it.’” [Obviously, this is a linguistic wordplay; the phrases ‘smelling dried fish’ and ‘don’t even think about it’ sound exactly the same in Mandarin Chinese.] Jiumozhi replied, “Ah, so that’s how it is. I was very good bosom

friends with Mr. Murong. My only desire is to pay my respects before his tomb. Steward, no need to be too skeptical."

Sun San said, "The honest truth is, I don't have the authority to grant you your wish. If I were to go against my deceased master's last command, when the young master returns and finds out, he'll break my old legs. How about this, I'll go invite the old mistress and ask her to come up with a plan. What do you think?" Jiumozhi replied, "The old mistress? Who are you referring to?" Sun San said, "Old Mistress Murong. She was our deceased master's aunt. Every time an old friend of the old master came, they would kowtow to her and pay their respects. With the young master not at home, everything needs to go through the old mistress." Jiumozhi replied, "That's very good to know. Please inform the old mistress that Jiumozhi of Tibet has come to pay his respects to her." Sun San said, "Great Master, you are too polite. You flatter us too much." As he spoke, he entered the main pavilion.

Duan Yu thought to himself, "This girl is both intelligent and strange. I wonder why she is playing all these pranks on this evil baldy?" After a long period of time, a clattering of rings and ornaments could be heard as an old lady tottered out of the inner pavilion. Before she herself arrived, that light fragrance arrived first. Duan Yu couldn't help but smile. He thought to himself, "This time, she's dressed up as an old lady." The old lady wore an ancient, copper-colored satin skirt and coat, wearing jade bracelets around her wrists, and pearls and jade ornaments in her hair. Her appearance was graceful and luxurious, but had many wrinkles on her face. Her eyes seemed confused and misty, as though they could no longer see. Duan Yu secretly cheered, "This young lass is incredible. Whatever she dresses up as, she looks like. What's even more amazing is that she was able to change in such a short period of time. Her movements are so swift. It really must be acclaimed as the height of perfection in the art."

The old lady supported herself on her walking stick, entering the pavilion with faltering steps. She said, "Ah Bi, have friends of your old master arrived? Why haven't they kowtowed to me?" Her head turned left and right, as though she had very poor eyesight and couldn't tell who was present. Ah Bi gestured towards Jiumozhi and said in a low voice, "Quick, kowtow. As soon as you kowtow, the old mistress will be happy and will agree to anything." The old lady turned her head around, cupping her hands around her ears so as to hear more clearly. She loudly said, "Girl, what did you just say? Did they kowtow yet?"

Jiumozhi said, "Old Mistress, how are you? This humble monk has come to pay his respects to you." He bowed deeply, his hands folded together. His twin hands exerted power, and a deep booming sound came from the bricks on the floor, as though someone had kowtowed."

Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi looked at each other. Both of them were equally struck dumb with amazement. "This monk's internal energy is so profound! I fear that we won't be able to take even a single stance from him."

The old madame nodded. "Excellent, excellent. In this world, there are more deceitful people than there are honest people. Even for something like kowtowing, some evil scoundrels want to be deceitful. Even when they clearly have not kowtowed, they make booming sounds on the floor as though they have, so as to deceive this old lady's bad eyes. But you, kid, you are great, you are very obedient. You kowtowed very loudly." Duan Yu couldn't resist a snort of amusement. The old lady slowly turned around and said, "Ah Bi, did someone just fart?" She reached out her hand and pinched her nose. Ah Bi, holding in her laughter, said, "Old Mistress, that isn't the case. Young Master Duan let out a laugh." The old lady said, "Broken? What's broken? [Duan Yu's surname, 'Duan', sounds the same as the Chinese character for 'broken' or 'snapped']" Ah Bi replied, "Nothing's broken. His surname is 'Duan'. He's the young

master of the Duan family.” The old lady nodded. “Right, young master this and young master that. Day in and day out, you are always thinking about your young master.” Ah Bi’s face reddened. “The old mistress’s ears aren’t good. She needs to be more careful when gossiping.”

The old lady turned towards Duan Yu. “Kid, why haven’t you kowtowed yet?” Duan Yu said, “Old Mistress, there’s something I want to tell you.” The old lady said, “What is it?”

Duan Yu replied, “I have a niece who is very intelligent and clever, but who is also extremely mischievous. She loves dressing up as a little monkey to mess around. One day she’ll dress up as a male monkey, the next day a female monkey. She knows how to do acrobatics too. Old Mistress, you’d love to meet her. It’s too bad that I didn’t bring her along to have her kowtow to you.”

The old lady really was the other servant girl of the Murong family, Ah Zhu, dressed up in disguise. Her abilities in the arts of disguise and makeup were godlike. Not only could she make herself look different, her words and her mannerisms were impeccable as well, not revealing a single flaw. Thus, even extremely intelligent people such as Jiumozhi or experienced jianghu veterans such as Cui Baiquan didn’t suspect her in the slightest. Unexpected, Duan Yu was able to ferret out the truth, using the faint aroma which her body gave off and which she had no way of hiding.

Hearing him speak thusly, Ah Zhu was startled, but didn’t change her demeanor in the slightest, continuing to appear like a senile, doddering old lady with bad vision and half-deaf ears. She said, “Good kid, good kid, you are really smart. I’ve never met such a smart child as you before. Good kid, don’t talk too much. This old lady will definitely take care of you.”

Duan Yu thought to himself, “What she means is that she wants me to not reveal her secret. She’s trying to fend off this evil baldy, Jiumozhi. That makes her a friend, not an

enemy." He said, "Old Mistress, please put your heart at ease. Now that I am at your manor, naturally I am at your disposal and will obey your commands."

Ah Zhu replied, "You are an obedient kid to listen to my words. Great, first kowtow three times to this old lady. I definitely will give you great benefits if you do so."

Duan Yu was startled. "I am the regal son of the Imperial Crown Brother of Dali. How can I kowtow to a little girl like you?"

Ah Zhu, seeing the awkward look on his face, sneered. "Good kid, let me tell you right now, the best choice for you is to obediently kowtow a few times to your granny."

Duan Yu turned his head, and saw Ah Bi, lips pursed in a smile, casting side-glances at him. Her skin was as white as freshly peeled water chestnuts, and a small, fine black mole was at the corner of her lips, making her look all the more charming and lovely. His heart was suddenly stirred. "Sister Ah Bi, I heard that there is a Sister Ah Zhu in your respected manor. Is she...is she was beautiful as you are?" Ah Bi smiled. "Aha! How could an ugly freak like me be worthy of such praise? If Sister Ah Zhu heardja askin' questions like that, she'd definitely be real unhappy-like, yeah? How can I compare to her? Sister Ah Zhu is ten times more beautiful than I am." Duan Yu asked, "Truly?" Ah Bi grinned, "Why would I lie to ya?" Duan Yu said, "For a person to be ten times more beautiful than you is totally impossible, unless... unless it's the goddess of the jade cavern. For a person to even be on your level would make them a rare beauty." Ah Bi's cheeks flushed red. She bashfully said, "The old mistress asked you to kowtow. Who asked you to praise me so highly?"

Duan Yu said, "The old mistress must have originally been a nationally famous, heaven-like beauty as well. To tell you the truth, I don't really care if I get any benefits, but am more than willing to kowtow a few times to a world class beauty." As he spoke, he fell to his knees. He thought to

himself, "Since I am going to kowtow, I might as well do so loudly. I already kowtowed a few thousand times to the jade statue. What's the big deal if I kowtow to a beautiful lady of the jianghu a few times?" He immediately kowtowed loudly three times.

Ah Zhu was extremely delighted. She thought to herself, "This young master clearly knows that I'm just a little servant girl, but is actually willing to kowtow to me. This is really rare." She said, "Good kid, very good, very good. It's too bad that I didn't bring you a meeting-present." Ah Bi interjected, "Old Mistress, just don't forget about it an' jes' give it to'm next time."

Ah Zhu glanced at Ah Bi. She said towards Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi, "Why haven't these two guests kowtowed to me?" Guo Yanzhi let out a 'hmp' sound. In a rough voice and with a rough attitude, he said, "Do you know martial arts or not?" Ah Zhu said, "What did you say?" Guo Yanzhi replied, "I asked if you know martial arts or not. If you possess a high level of martial arts, then I, Guo Yanzhi, am willing to die underneath your hand, Mistress Murong! But if you aren't a member of the wulin, then there's no need for me to bother wasting my breath with you." Ah Zhu shook her head. "What's this about a hundred-legged centipede? Naturally, we have centipedes here. When they bite people, it's very painful!" [Centipede sounds similar to martial arts]. Turning towards Jiumozhi, she said, "Great monk, I hear you want to go check out my nephew's tomb. What type of treasure do you intend to pilfer from the tomb?"

Although Jiumozhi still did not realize that she was actually a girl, he had long since figured out that she was just pretending to be deaf and dumb, and that she wasn't as near-sighted or as muddle-headed as she pretended to be. He became more guarded, and thought to himself, "Mr. Murong was such an extraordinary figure. His family members must be exceptional as well." He pretended to not have heard the words, "pilfer from the tomb", and said, "This

humble monk was a close bosom friend of Mr. Murong. After hearing the horrible news of his passing, I have rushed here from Tibet to pay my respects before his tomb. In the past, I made a promise to Mr. Murong to bring him the manuscript for the Duan family of Dali's 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' and let him check it out. For me to still have not carried out my promise fills my heart with shame."

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi exchanged glances. They both thought to themselves, "Finally, this monk has brought up the relevant issues." Ah Zhu asked, "And what happens if you are able to bring the manuscript for the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'? What happens if you are not?" Jiumozhi replied, "In the past, Mr. Murong and I made an agreement; as long as I was able to retrieve the manual of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' for him to read for a few days, he would allow me to read for a few days in the 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment'". Ah Zhu suddenly felt afraid. "For this monk to actually know the name, 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment'...maybe he is telling the truth after all." She immediately pretended to be confused and said, "What's this about porridge and boiled dumplings? Do you want some porridge and chicken broth dumplings? That's easily done. You are a monk. Can you eat meat or fish?"

Jiumozhi turned his head towards Ah Bi. "I don't know if this old mistress is truly confused or just faking it. For her to be so unwelcoming cannot help but to give a feeling of coldness in one's heart."

Ah Zhu said, "Oh, so your heart is feeling cold? Ah Bi, quick, go and make a bowl of hot chicken and duck blood soup so as to warm this great master's heart and lungs." Ah Bi held in her laughter. "The master doesn't eat meat." Ah Zhu nodded. "Then don't use real chickens and real ducks. Use vegetarian chicken and vegetarian duck meat [usually made from tofu and veggies]." Ah Bi said, "Old Mistress,

vegetarian chicken doesn't have any blood." Ah Zhu said, "Then what are we to do?"

The two of them exchanged one phrase after another, and all their words were full of nonsense. Most people of Suzhou had quick teeth and clever mouths. In later generations, the story-telling abilities of Suzhou people became famous throughout the world because of this. These two girls were used to messing around and teasing each other, and they now rendered Jiumozhi unable to do anything.

Originally, he came to Gusu with the intention of discussing an important matter with Young Master Murong. Unexpectedly, the young master was not present, and everyone he met intertwined falsehoods with obfuscations, sometimes seeming to do so inadvertently, other times seeming to act in such a way on purpose, intermixing lies with truth. This rendered him unable to decide how to handle the situation. After a brief moment of pondering, he concluded that Madame Murong, Sun San, Old Servant Huang, and Ah Bi were all trying to ward him off. Since they would not let him visit the mausoleum, they definitely would not be willing to allow him to enter the 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment' and read secret martial arts manuals. At this moment, he decided, what he should do would be to clearly explain the situation and ignore their play-acting and deception. That way, in the future, regardless of whether they treated him with respect or came to blows with him, he would have already claimed the moral high ground. He immediately said in a calm, even-tempered voice, "I have brought the manuscript for the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. Thus, I make the daring request that we act in accordance with the agreement and I be allowed to go read in the 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment'." Ah Bi said, "Old Master Murong has already passed away. First, there's no evidence of this agreement. Secondly, even if you brought the manual, there is nobody present who is

capable of reading it. Any agreements made in the past are naturally no longer valid now." Ah Zhu said, "What sword manual? Where is it? Let me check it out first."

Pointing to Duan Yu, Jiumozhi said, "Within this young gentleman's mind lies the fully memorized manuscript for the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. I have brought him here; this is the same as bringing an actual manuscript." Ah Bi smiled. "I thought there really was a manual. So you were playing a joke on us, Great Master." Jiumozhi said, "I wouldn't dare. The original manual for the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' has been burnt to ash by Elder Kurong at the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. Fortunately, this gentleman has fully memorized it all." Ah Bi replied, "If Young Master Duan memorized it, then it's his business. Even if we were to invite someone to the 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment' to read, it would be him. What does it have to do with you, Great Master?" Jiumozhi replied, "In order to fulfill my promise of latter days, I intend to immolate him in front of Mr. Murong's mausoleum."

Upon hearing these words, everyone was astonished. But seeing the calm, placid, serious expression on the face, he definitely did not appear to be making a joke. This astonished them all the more. Ah Bi said, "Great Master, you must be jesting! How can he allow you to just casually cremate him like that?" Jiumozhi said dully, "If I want to immolate him, I don't think he would be able to resist." Ah Bi smiled. "Great Master, you say that Young Gentleman Duan has memorized the manual for the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', but that clearly cannot be true. If Young Gentleman Duan really memorized such a fearful martial arts as the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', how could he be so easily controlled by you?" Jiumozhi nodded. "Miss, you know only half the story. I have sealed all of his major acupoints, and he is unable to exert any energy at all."

Ah Zhu shook her head continuously. "I believe you even less now. Unseal his acupoints and let him show off the

‘Divine Sword of the Six Meridians’ first. I think that ninety nine percent of your words are lies.” Jiumozhi nodded. “Good idea. We can demonstrate.”

Duan Yu praised Ah Bi as being beautiful, and was absolutely charmed by her vocal and instrumental musical skills. Ah Bi naturally liked him. In addition, not only did he not reveal Ah Zhu’s disguise, he also kowtowed to her three times; this made Ah Zhu happy with him as well. Thus, upon hearing that his acupoints had been sealed, both of the girls wanted to trick Jiumozhi into unsealing his acupoints. They didn’t expect that Jiumozhi would immediately agree. He stretched out his palm towards Duan Yu’s body and tapped his hand a few times towards Duan Yu’s back, chest, and legs. Duan Yu instantly felt as though his acupoints became unsealed, and the flow of his blood became unimpeded. As soon as he generated his internal energy, he could feel his qi beginning to circulate throughout his body. He experimentally generated his energy in accordance with the directions for the ‘Zhongchong Sword’ technique, inciting his internal energy to pass to the middle finger of his right hand. He felt a roasting hot sensation at the tip of his middle finger, and knew that all he needed to do would be to extend his finger and sword qi would immediately shoot out.

Jiumozhi said, “Young Master Duan, Mistress Murong does not believe that you have practiced the ‘Divine Sword of the Six Meridians’. Please show off your ability. Do as I do, and chop off a branch from this osmanthus tree.” As he spoke, he sent out a slanting palm strike with his left palm. His palm released its stored up internal energy; it was a stroke from his ‘Blazing Sabre’ technique. With a light cracking sound, a single branch of the osmanthus tree broke in half and fell to the ground, as though someone had chopped it with a sabre or a sword.

Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi couldn’t help but let out an ‘Ah!’ cry of alarm. Although they knew that this barbarian monk possessed some extremely unusual skills, they

thought that his skills were simply heterodox and evil. Only now, when they watched him chop off a tree branch, did they realize how profound his internal energy was. His internal energy was at a level that was rarely heard of and rarely seen.

Duan Yu shook his head. "I don't know any martial arts at all, much less any 'Divine Sword of the Seven Meridians' or 'Heavenly Sabre of the Eight Channels'. Why did you have to go and ruin a perfectly fine osmanthus tree?" Jiumozhi replied, "Young Master Duan, why so modest? Your level of martial arts is highest amongst the elite martial artists of Dali's Duan family. In this day and age, aside from Young Master Murong and my humble self, I'm afraid no one is superior to you. Gusu's Murong mansion is a repository of martial arts learning in the world. Why don't you show a few stances and have the old mistress give you some advice? That would be a very good thing for you." Duan Yu replied, "Big monk, this entire trip you have taken such wonderful care of me, tugging me here and pulling me there, dragging me all the way to Jiangnan. At first, I didn't want to say another word to you at all. But now that I'm at Gusu and have met such beautiful, heavenly girls here, the anger in my heart has dissipated. From now on, let's make a clean break. Neither of us needs to bother with the other."

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, hearing him speak in a pedantic, bookworm like manner, couldn't help but secretly laugh. They couldn't help but feel secretly happy as well upon hearing him praise them.

Jiumozhi said, "Young Master, if you refuse to display your 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', won't you be making me to look like a liar?"

Duan Yu said, "Well, you were full of nonsense to begin with. If you had an agreement with Mr. Murong, why didn't you come to Dali earlier? Why would you wait until Mr. Murong passed away and became unable to refute your words before coming to the Murong manor and cause an

endless ruckus? You know what I think? I think you covet the high-level martial arts skills of the Murong family of Gusu, and came up with a false story to trick the old mistress into allowing you into their library and secretly study their private martial arts, and figure out the secrets behind their 'Using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent'. How can you possibly not realize that these people, being of a long-standing, famous, aristocratic wulin family, would see right through this trick of yours? If you could really steal away their martial arts techniques based solely upon your lies and rubbish, wouldn't anybody be able to? Who isn't able to make up this sort of nonsense?"

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi agreed in one voice.

Jiumozhi shook his head. "Young Master Duan, your conjectures are incorrect. Although it is true that I made my agreement with Mr. Murong a long time ago, for nine years I sequestered myself in solitary meditation while I mastered the 'Blazing Sabre' technique, and thus could not go to Dali. If I had not mastered the 'Blazing Sabre' technique, I would not have been able to leave the Heavenly Dragon Monastery alive.

Duan Yu said, "Great Master, you possess great fame, great power, and such an incredible level of martial arts. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you just stayed peacefully in Tibet as its dharma king and national protector? Why come to Jiangnan to deceive people? I recommend you return as soon as possible."

Jiumozhi said, "Young Master, if you refuse to display the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', please do not blame me for being discourteous." Duan Yu said, "You've been acting impolite all along. Can it be that you've found a way to be even more impolite still? At worst, you can kill me with a single chop of your sabre. What's the big deal?" Jiumozhi replied, "Very good! Ware my sabre!" He raised his left palm and a powerful wind rushed towards Duan Yu's face.

Duan Yu had long since hatched a plan. As his martial arts was far inferior to that of Jiumozhi, whether or not he fought back made no difference at all. If Jiumozhi wanted him to show that he knew the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', he would refuse to do so no matter what. Thus, upon seeing Jiumozhi convert his internal energy into a sabre blade and chop towards him, Duan Yu toughened his spine and neither blocked nor parried. Jiumozhi was startled. Duan Yu was his only source of the manual of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'; no matter what, he couldn't kill him before he acquired it for himself. He hurriedly lifted his hands higher, and with a 'shua' sound, a cool wind passed over Duan Yu's head, taking with it a large chunk of his hair.

Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi were simultaneously shocked. Ah Zhu and Ah Bi's faces couldn't help but turn pale as well. Jiumozhi said in an awe-inspiring voice, "Young Master Duan, would you really rather die than fight back?"

Duan Yu had long since thrown his fear of death into the wind. He laughed loudly and said, "Greed, wrath, lust, desire, foolishness. Master Monk, you possess all of these flaws, and yet you falsely claim to be an eminent Buddhist monk. You really are not deserving of the title!"

Jiumozhi suddenly hacked a palm towards Ah Bi while shouting, "Unspeakable! I'll first kill this servant girl of the Murong manor to display my power."

This stroke came very quickly. Ah Bi was shocked, and hurriedly slanted her body to avoid it. Crack! A chair behind her was split into two by this gush of internal energy. Jiumozhi followed that strike with another from his right palm. Ah Bi fell down on the floor and hurriedly rolled away. Although her movements were quick, she was already in a very precarious situation. Jiumozhi let out a fierce roar, and shot out his third sabre attack.

Ah Bi was so terrified that her face turned pale. She had no idea what to do against this invisible internal energy attack. Ah Zhu didn't have any time to think. She shot out

her palms and attacked Jiumozhi's back. When she was earlier moving about and speaking, she had the mannerisms of a seventy or eighty year old lady. But now, when she attacked, she displayed strong, vigorous, and quick movements.

In a single glance, Jiumozhi understood everything. With a laugh, he said, "So there are sixteen or seventeen year old grannies in the world? How long, exactly, did you intend to deceive this monk?" He struck a palm backwards and with a cracking sound, shattered the wooden staff in her hands into three pieces. Following this, he once more chopped towards Ah Bi. In her terror, Ah Bi grabbed a table and used it as a shield. With two clattering sounds, the red sandalwood table instantly disintegrated, leaving only a pair of table legs in her hands.

Seeing Ah Bi forced to the wall, without any place to flee and Jiumozhi striking with yet another palm, Duan Yu no longer cared about whether or not he could defeat Jiumozhi; his only intention was to save her life. He struck out with his middle finger, and his internal energy surged forth from his 'Zhongchong' acupoint with a 'chi-chi' sneering sound. It was the 'Zhongchong Sword' technique. Jiumozhi didn't really want to kill Ah Bi; he just wanted to force Duan Yu's hand. Otherwise, how could Ah Bi manage to dodge the wondrous, brilliant stances of the 'Blazing Sabre' technique for so long? Seeing Duan Yu strike out at him, he immediately sent out a hacking palm towards Ah Zhu. A powerful gust of wind roared towards her, sending her staggering back. The shoulder of her dress was mangled by his internal energy. She let out an 'Ah!', crying in startlement. Duan Yu followed his first attack with a 'Shaoze Sword' attack from his left hand, blocking Jiumozhi's attack on Ah Zhu with the 'Blazing Sabre' technique.

In the blink of an eye, Ah Bi and Ah Zhu both escaped a very dangerous situation, as Duan Yu used his 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' to totally block both of Jiumozhi's sabre

strikes. Jiumozhi, wanting both to show off his own ability as well as to prove that Duan Yu really knew the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', intentionally let Duan Yu's internal energy block his own. Having drained the internal energy of so many elite martial artists, at this point in time, Duan Yu's internal energy was actually more powerful than that of Jiumozhi. Unfortunately, he didn't know any martial arts at all, and wasn't able to execute any of the sword techniques which he had memorized at the Heavenly Dragon Monastery. Jiumozhi tricked his powerful internal energy into being dispersed east and west, to the point where the doors and the windows were filled with holes. All the while, Jiumozhi was saying, "The 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians' really is very formidable! No wonder Mr. Murong admired it so much in the past."

Cui Baiquan was extremely startled. "I always believed that Prince Duan has no skill in martial arts. Who would have imagined that he possesses such a refined, exquisite technique? The Duan family of Dali really lives up to its fame. Fortunately, I did not do a single bad thing during my time at the South-Subduing Palace. Otherwise, how could this old life of mine remained for so long?" The more he thought, the more nervous he grew, until his forehead and his clothes were soaked with sweat.

Jiumozhi fought with Duan Yu for a while. With each stroke, he was capable of taking Duan Yu's life. However, he wanted to play around with Duan Yu for a bit. But towards the end, he felt less and less contempt towards Duan Yu. He felt that Duan Yu's internal energy was exceedingly strong and vigorous, and definitely not below his own at all. But for some reason, once the energy was actually used by Duan Yu, the end result was not that impressive at all. It was akin to a three year old kid from an exceedingly rich family who owned tens of thousands of strings of cash, but was unable to use it properly. After throwing out a few more strokes, Jiumozhi's heart was suddenly shaken. "What if in the

future, he grows intelligent, suddenly learning how to properly use his abilities as well as the fundamentals of martial arts? With his level of internal energy and this sword technique, what an extremely fearful opponent he would be!”

Duan Yu had long known that his continued existence lay solely under the control of Jiumozhi. He shouted, “Sister Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, hurry up and run away! If you take any longer, you won’t have a chance to escape!” Ah Zhu asked, “Young Master Duan, why are you rescuing us?” Duan Yu replied, “This monk relies on his high level of martial arts to bully and oppress others. Unfortunately, I don’t know any martial arts at all. It is difficult for me to fight him off. Hurry up and run away!”

Jiumozhi laughed. “Far too late for that.” Taking a step forwards, he struck out with the fingers of both hands, pointing towards Duan Yu’s acupoints. Duan Yu let out a cry. “Aiyo!” He tried to avoid the attack, but how could he? Once more, three of his vital acupoints were sealed, and his limbs immediately felt numb and heavy. Falling on the floor, he shouted loudly, “Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, hurry up and leave!”

Jiumozhi laughed, “You are at the brink of death and unable to protect yourself. You still have the desire to enjoy perfume and cherish jade?” He returned to his original seat and said to Ah Zhu, “Young Miss, there’s no need for you to continue play-acting and fooling around. Who, exactly, is in charge of the manor’s matter? Young Master Duan fully memorized the entirety of the ‘Divine Sword of the Six Meridians’, but does not know martial arts and thus finds it difficult to actually use it. Tomorrow, I will take him to Mr. Murong’s mausoleum and burn him in sacrifice. In the underworld, Mr. Murong will understand that his old friend did not renege upon their earlier agreement.”

Ah Zhu knew that no one currently at the Pavilion of Zither Melodies was a match for this monk. Wrinkling her forehead, she laughed. “Fine! Master Monk, we’ll believe

your words. The old master's mausoleum is a day's journey away by water. Tonight, it is too late to leave. Tomorrow morning, the two of us will personally escort you and Young Master Duan to pay your respects at the tomb. The four of you, please wait just a short moment. Dinner will be served soon." After she spoke, she grabbed Ah Bi by the wrist and retreated into the inner pavilion.

After an hour passed, a male servant came out and said, "Miss Ah Zhu would like to invite the four of you to the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain' for supper." Jiumozhi said, "Many thanks!" Stretching out his hand, he seized Duan Yu's arm and followed the man in. They winded their way through hundreds of feet of paved cobblestone alleys and a few stone parks before arriving by the waterside. Beneath the willow trees lay a small boat. The male servant pointed to a cabin with windows on all four sides that was situated in the middle of the water. "It is right there." Jiumozhi, Duan Yu, Cui Baiquan, and Guo Yanzhi stepped onto the boat, and the male servant rowed them there. They arrived after a brief period of time.

Duan Yu walked up the wooden oak stairs of and entered the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain'. He saw Ah Bi waiting to attend to the guests, wearing light green clothing. By her side stood a young maiden who wore a light red yarncloth garment. She was also around sixteen or seventeen years of age, and she aimed an expression that seemed like a smile yet wasn't quite towards Duan Yu. Her face was full of mischievousness and cleverness. Ah Bi had a 'melon seed' face and was elegant and beautiful. This maiden had a 'goose egg' face. Her eyes were lively and intelligent, and she displayed a different type of stirring aura.

As soon as he entered the room, Duan Yu once again smelled that faint fragrance. Laughing, he said, "Sister Ah Zhu, you are such a beautiful woman. It must have been tough for you to so convincingly portray an old lady." That maiden was indeed Ah Zhu. She batted him a glance, then

laughed, "You kowtowed to me three times and aren't content in your heart. Am I right?" Duan Yu shook his head repeatedly. "There was a lot of reason for me to kowtow three times to you. Only, my guesses were a bit off." Ah Zhu asked, "What did you guess wrong?" Duan Yu replied, "I guessed from the beginning that you were just like Ah Bi, that both of you were beauties the likes of which are rarely seen in the world. But in my heart, I imagined that you must have been about on par with Ah Bi. I didn't imagine that upon actually seeing you...well...well..." Ah Zhu interjected, "You found that I was far inferior to Ah Bi?" Ah Bi said at the same time, "You were greatly startled, because she is ten times more beautiful than me, right?"

Duan Yu shook his head. "Neither. I just felt that the heavens are really capable and are truly worthy of mankind's admiration. After wracking their brains and creating such a beautiful girl as Sister Ah Bi, they should have totally exhausted all of their ability to portray the spirit and beauty of Jiangnan. Who would have imagined that they would be able to create a Sister Ah Zhu as well? The two of you look totally different, yet each of you possess your own unique beauty. It makes me want to say a few things in praise, but I couldn't manage to say a single word at all."

Ah Zhu laughed. "Bah! You glibly just said a lot of things in praising us, and still want to claim that you couldn't manage to say a single word?"

Ah Bi smiled slightly, then turned her head and spoke to Jiumozhi and the rest. "I'm afraid that we don't have the resources to properly welcome you four esteemed personages. I'll have to ask that you just make do with our watery wine and do your best to enjoy some of our local Jiangnan dishes." She immediately invited the four of them to be seated, with her and Ah Bi taking seats to the right.

Duan Yu saw that the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain' was surrounded by water on all four sides. Glancing out the window, he saw mist covering the waters of the lake. Turning

back to the table, he saw that all of the dishes on the table were made of exquisite porcelain. In his heart, he couldn't help but exclaim in praise.

Shortly afterwards, the male servants brought some dishes made from fruits and vegetables. Four vegetarian dishes were especially prepared for Jiumozhi. Next came a number of cooked dishes; white water chestnuts with shrimp meat, lotus leaf and winter bamboo shoot soup, cherry ham, dragon well vegetable leaves with chicken, and the like. Every dish was extremely unique. In the middle of the fish, shrimp, and meat were intermixed flower petals and fresh fruit. The dishes were extremely beautiful, and gave off a natural, pure fragrance. Duan Yu tried a few chopsticks of every single dish. All of them were wonderful and tasty. He praised, "Only such a wonderful landscape as this place can produce such talented people. In turn, only such talented people can be so intelligent and wise as to produce such elegant dishes."

Ah Zhu said, "Guess if I cooked the dishes, or if Ah Bi cooked the dishes?" Duan Yu replied, "The cherry ham and the plum blossom duck are fragrant, tender, and rosy. I think you made them. The lotus leaf and winter bamboo shoot soup and the round jade fish slices are verdant and cleanly chopped. Naturally, they were made by Sister Ah Bi."

Ah Zhu clapped her hands and laughed. "Your guessing abilities are really good! Ah Bi, what should we reward him with?" Ah Bi smiled. "If Young Master Duan has any instructions for us to carry out, we would naturally do so to the best of our abilities. What's all this talk about giving him 'rewards' and 'awards'? We're just servant girls. We aren't worthy of such." Ah Zhu replied, "Hah, as soon as you open your mouth you flatter others. No wonder everyone says you're good and I'm bad." Duan Yu laughed, "Gentle and refined, lively and clever. The two are equally good. Sister Ah Bi, earlier, when I heard you playing songs on the soft whip, I felt relaxed and carefree. I'd like to ask you to play

some melodies on actual instruments. If you do so, even if I am turned into ash tomorrow by this great monk, my time on this earth won't have been spent in vain.

Ah Bi slowly rose to her feet. "As long as you don't find it unpleasant to hear, I am willing to embarrass myself to give some joy to our guests." As she spoke, she went behind a screen, then came out with a precious jade zither. Ah Bi sat up straight on a brocade seat and placed the jade zither in front of her. She waved towards Duan Yu and laughed, "Young Master Duan, why don't you come over and see if you can identify what type of zither this is."

Walking to her, Duan Yu saw that her zither was a foot shorter than ordinary seven-stringed zithers. In addition, it had nine strings, each of which had a different color. He muttered to himself, "This is the first time I've seen this nine-stringed zither." Ah Zhu walked towards them and plucked a single string on the zither. The sound was very loud and clear. The string was made out of metal. Duan Yu said, "Sister, this zither is..."

Just as he spoke these four words, the floor suddenly disappeared underneath him. His body fell straight down. He couldn't help but let out a loud cry of alarm. Next, he felt as though he landed on a soft location. At the same time, he seemed to hear someone else say 'Aiyo!' and 'Not good!', followed by two splashing sounds. His body suddenly swayed, as the thing he was resting on began to move. This strange event happened very quickly and was totally unexpected. Startled and frightened, he hurriedly sat up. He saw that he was sitting in the middle of a small boat, with Ah Bi and Ah Zhu each sitting on one end of the boat. Each of them had an oar and were hurriedly paddling. Turning around, he saw that Jiumozhi, Cui Baiquan, and Guo Yanzhi's heads had just popped above the surface of the water. After but a short period of rowing by Ah Bi and Ah Zhu, the small boat was far away from the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain'.

Suddenly, a drenched person shot up from the surface of the lake. It was Jiumozhi. He landed on the side of the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain'. He easily snapped off part of a wooden pillar, aimed it at Ah Bi, then urgently cast it towards her. The makeshift missile made a whirring sound as it tore through the air with great force. Ah Bi cried out, "Young Master Duan, duck!" Duan Yu and the two girls ducked at the same time, as half of a wooden pillar flew right over their heads. The powerful wind made by its passing actually hurt their neck.

Flexing her body, Ah Zhu turned the boat slightly sideways. Suddenly, a series of loud splashing sounds could be heard, and the small boat suddenly lifted up in the air before immediately falling down again. A large amount of lake water entered the boat and all three of them became wet. Turning his head, Duan Yu saw that Jiumozhi had already wrecked the wooden portion of the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain', and was repeatedly tossing stone vessels, incense burners, and other objects towards them. Watching the trajectories of the missiles, Ah Bi turned the boat to avoid them. Meanwhile, Ah Zhu kept on paddling forward with all her might. With each stroke of the oar, the boat travelled several feet farther away from the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain'. Jiumozhi continued to lob missiles at them, but the distance between the boat and where they landed grew greater and greater. Even if his strength was greater, he couldn't compete with the ceaseless tugging of the oars by the two maidens. Turning his head again, Duan Yu saw that Cui Baiquan and Guo Yanzhi had managed to scramble onto the steps of the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain'. He felt delighted, but upon seeing Jiumozhi leap into a small boat, let out a cry of alarm.

Ah Zhu cried out, "That evil monk is following us!" She exerted all her might to paddle as fast as she could, but after turning her head to take another glance, burst into loud laughter. Duan Yu also turned his head and saw that

Jiumozhi's boat was just spinning in place. Evidently, although Jiumozhi possessed a very high level of martial arts, he didn't know how to row a boat.

The three of them immediately felt relieved. But after a short period of time, they saw that Jiumozhi had managed to stabilize the boat and was now hurriedly paddling after them. Ah Bi sighed, "This great master is really intelligent. Anything he doesn't know, he learns in a flash." Ah Zhu replied, "Let's play hide and seek with him." Tugging on her oar, she brought the boat into the middle of a dense forest of water chestnuts. The great lake had hundreds of harbors and thousands of waterways. After making several turns, their boat entered a small river. They thought to themselves that it was very unlikely that Jiumozhi would be able to locate them.

Duan Yu said, "Unfortunately, my acupoints are sealed, and I can't help you two to row." Ah Bi comforted him, "Young Master Duan, don't be worried. The monk won't be able to chase after us, yeah."

Duan Yu said, "The secret mechanism in the 'Dwelling for Listening to the Rain' is really interesting. This boat was precisely placed underneath the location where you play the zither, right?" Ah Bi smiled. "Right. That's why I invited you to come check out the zither. Sister Ah Zhu's plucking of the zither was the sign for the male servants outside to remove the planks underneath us and have everyone go plop, plop, plop!" The three of them laughed loudly in unison. Ah Bi hurriedly covered her mouth and said with a smile, "Don't let that monk hear us."

From far away, a voice could be heard. "Miss Ah Zhu, Miss Ah Bi, please row the boat back. Please hurry back, I am a friend of your master and definitely will not give you a hard time." It was Jiumozhi's voice. His voice was gentle and amiable, capable of causing people to naturally obey his instructions.

Ah Zhu was startled. "The great master asked for us to come back and says he definitely won't hurt us." As she spoke, she stopped paddling, as though she was seriously considering it. Ah Bi chimed in, "If that's the case, let's go back!" Duan Yu's internal energy was very strong, and so wasn't bewildered in the slightest by Jiumozhi's voice. He hurriedly said, "He's lying. How can you trust his words?" Jiumozhi's pleasant, amiable words entered their ears. "Young Misses, your master has returned. He says he wants to see both of you, and that you are to return immediately. Yes, return immediately." Ah Zhu was compelled to agree. "Yes!" Lifting up the oar, she turned the boat around.

Duan Yu thought to himself, "If Young Master Murong had really returned, he himself would call out to Ah Zhu and Ah Bi. Why would he rely on Jiumozhi? This is no doubt an evil technique meant to delude the minds of others." Having come to this conclusion, he reached down and grabbed a few water chestnut leaves, rolled them together, then stuck them into Ah Bi and Ah Zhu's ears.

Her wits returned to her, Ah Zhu involuntarily cried out, "Ack! Close one!" Ah Bi was also frightened. "This monk knows some sort of soul-affecting technique. We almost fell for his trick." Turning the boat around, Ah Zhu hurriedly began paddling again. She cried out, "Ah Bi, paddle as fast as you can!"

The two of them paddled the boat directly into the middle of the water chestnut fields. After a long time, Jiumozhi's voice grew faint and indistinct, until finally he could no longer be heard. Duan Yu gestured to the two of them, signaling that they could now remove the leaves from their ears.

Patting her chest, Ah Bi let out a long sigh. "Whew, that was real scary-like, yeah! Sister Ah Zhu, whaddya think we should do?" Ah Zhu said, "Let's just paddle around in circles and waste the monk's time. If we get hungry, we can pluck water chestnuts and lotus roots to eat. Even if we face off

against him for ten days or half a month, we wouldn't be in the slightest danger." Ah Bi smiled. "What an interesting idea. Young Master Duan, would you be too bored though?" Duan Yu clapped his hands and laughed. "There's no shortage of sights to see on this lake. With the two of you accompanying me in touring this place for ten days, I would be happier than a celestial being." Ah Bi's smooth lips gently smiled. "We're heading towards the southeast right now. There's a lot of tributaries to this river. Aside from local fisherman, nobody can easily remember the routes. After we enter Lake Baiqu [Baiqu means 'Hundred Melodies'], the monk will definitely become unable to catch up to us." Duan Yu lay down on the boat, gazing upon the many glittering stars in the sky. Aside from the rustle of the oars and the boat brushing against the water caltrops, there was no sound at all. There was a gentle breeze on the lake, which carried with it a faint aroma. He thought to himself, "Even if I lived the rest of my life like this, I wouldn't mind." Then he thought to himself, "With Ah Zhu and Ah Bi being such nice people, Young Master Murong can't be some sort of horrible villain either. I wonder if he really was the one who killed Master Xuanbei of Shaolin and Mr. Huo's martial brother. Alas, although my family has a lot of servant girls, none of them can match Sister Ah Zhu or Sister Ah Bi."

After a long time, just as he was about to close his eyes and fall asleep, he suddenly hear Ah Bi let out a quiet laugh and say in a low voice, "Sister Ah Zhu, come over here." Ah Zhu also spoke in a low voice, "Whaddya want?" Ah Bi said, "Come over here, I have somethin' to say." Ah Zhu lowered the oar and walked to the stern of the boat. Ah Bi pulled her over by the shoulder and quietly laughed into her ear, "Help me think of something so I ain't gonna be shamin' mahself." Ah Zhu laughed, "Whassa matter?" Ah Bi said, "Quiet, quiet. Is Young Master Duan a'sleepin' yet?" Ah Zhu replied, "Dunno, jus' go'n'ask'm." Ah Bi said, "Can't, can't. Ah Zhu, Ah Zhu, I...I...I need to relieve myself."

Their voices were as soft as the buzzing of mosquitoes, but Duan Yu's internal energy was extremely profound. Naturally, he heard every word clearly. Upon hearing Ah Bi say these words, he didn't dare move in the slightest. He pretended to let out light snores and be asleep, so as to prevent Ah Bi from being embarrassed.

Ah Zhu laughed quietly. "Young Master Duan is a'sleepin'. Just go ahead and relieve yourself." Ah Bi bashfully said, "Ain't gonna try. What if I'm half-way through and Young Master Duan suddenly wakes up? It'd be unthinkable!" Ah Zhu couldn't help but let out a peal of laughter. She hurriedly covered her mouth, then said in a low voice, "Whaddya mean, it'd be unthinkable? Everyone needs to relieve themselves from time to time. Nuthin' weird about it." Ah Bi shook her body, then said in a pleading voice, "Please, Sister Ah Zhu, help me think of an idea." Ah Zhu replied, "I'll stand in front of you. You go ahead and relieve yourself. Even if Young Master Duan wakes up, he won't be able to see nuthin', yeah?" Ah Bi replied, "But there would be noise! I can't have him hear either. I...I..." Ah Zhu laughed. "Yer sis is outta ideas. I guess you can just relieve yourself on yourself. He won't smell anything." Ah Bi said, "I can't! When someone's in front of me, I can't go." Ah Zhu said, "There's no place to go. Just go ahead and do it." Ah Bi was so anxious she began to cry. "I can't, I just can't!"

Ah Zhu suddenly let out another peal of laughter. "It's all your fault. If you hadn't said anything, I would've been fine. But now I need to go too! From here to Madame Wang's residence lies only a half-nine away. Let's paddle there and relieve ourselves." Ah Bi said, "Madame Wang forbade us from entering. If she catches us, she'll slap us upside the head a few times." Ah Zhu said, "Ain't no need to worry. Madame Wang and our old mistress cursed at and insulted each other, but our old mistress has already passed away, yeah. We're just a pair of servant girls. How could we have offended her, and why would she slap us upside the head,

yeah? Let's just quietly sneak on land and relieve ourselves, then immediately leave. How would she ever know we were there?" Ah Bi replied, "That be so." After mumbling to herself a moment, she said, "Then we need ta have Young Master Duan go ashore and relieve himself first. Otherwise... otherwise, if we just rush ashore, it'd be real awkward-like, yeah?"

Ah Zhu let out a soft laugh. "You really know how to take care of people. Careful, if the young master finds out, he'll be jealous." Ah Bi sighed. "How could the young master take this sorta small matter to heart, yeah? We're just a pair of little servant girls. The young master has never taken us to heart." Ah Zhu said, "And I don't want you takin'm to heart, yeah? Sister Ah Bi, stop daydreaming about him day and night. ain't no use." Ah Bi let out a quiet sigh and did not reply. Ah Zhu clapped her on the shoulder, then said in a low voice, "You are thinking of relieving yourself, but also thinking about the young master. The two thoughts are getting mixed together, yeah? ain't that a laugh!" Ah Bi let out a soft laugh. "Sis, you're gossiping. Don't you have something to do?"

Ah Zhu returned to the front of the boat and began paddling again. After they paddled for some time, the sky began to brighten.

Duan Yu's internal energy was very vigorous, and his internal energy could not remain sealed forever. Previously, Jiumozhi would reseal his acupoints after every few hours had passed. Now, after so much time had passed, he gradually felt his internal energy circulation begin to smooth out as the sealed acupoints began to unlock. Letting out a lazy yawn, he sat up and said, "I took a long nap, while you two were working so hard. There's something I need to say which is a bit inappropriate. Please don't be offended. I, uh, I need to relieve myself." He thought that it would be best for he himself to broach the topic first, so as to allow the girls to not feel awkward.

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi simultaneously let out a burst of laughter. Ah Zhu said, "Not too far away is the abode of a relative of ours, the Wang family. Just go ashore there to relieve yourself." Duan Yu said, "If that's the case, wonderful." Ah Zhu immediately adopted a stern expression. "But Madame Wang has a very strange temperament. She doesn't allow strange men to visit. As soon as you take care of business, immediately return to the boat. We don't want to cause any unnecessary trouble." Duan Yu replied, "Alright, understood."

Chapter 12: Forevermore Intoxicated

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

www.spcnet.tv

The small boat weaved its way past a copse of weeping willows. Far in the distant, a reflection of crimson blossoming flowers could be seen in the water, as glorious as rosy clouds in the sky. Duan Yu let out an exclamatory 'Ah!' of appreciation.

Ah Zhu asked, "What's wrong?" Pointing to the blossoming flowers, Duan Yu said, "These are the camellia flowers native to Dali. How is it that this type of 'Dian tea-leaves' exist in the middle of Lake Taihu as well?" Camellia flowers of Yunnan province were the most famous of all, and were known as 'Dian tea-leaves' [Dian is another name for Yunnan]. Ah Zhu asked, "Really? This place is known as the Highland Manor of the Mantuo Flowers. It's filled with camellia leaves." Duan Yu thought to himself, "Camellia flowers are also known as 'jade leaves', but a third name for them is 'mantuo flowers'. Since this place is named after camellia flowers, it should be interesting for me to see what famous techniques they use to cultivate them here."

Rowing the oars, Ah Zhu sent the boat speeding directly towards the midst of the camellia flowers. As soon as they reached the shore, Duan Yu cast a glance at the land, but all he could see was red and white camellia flowers, with no buildings anywhere in sight. Duan Yu was raised in Dali, where camellia flowers were commonly seen everywhere. He didn't think the sight was particularly extraordinary at all, and thought to himself, "Although there are a lot of camellia flowers here, none of them appear to be of a high quality. I imagine that the best specimens are probably within the manor itself.

Ah Zhu pulled the boat ashore and smiled. "Young Gentleman Duan, we'll go inside for a bit. We'll come back

out very shortly.” Holding Ah Bi’s hand, she prepared to jump ashore. But suddenly, the scattered sounds of footsteps could be heard, and a servant girl dressed in green appeared.

The girl was holding a bunch of flowers and plants in her hands. Upon seeing Ah Bi and Ah Zhu, she hurriedly rushed towards them, her face filled with happiness. “Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, you two are really too daring! You snuck over here again! The madame said, ‘Use a knife to cut a cross on the faces of those two girls and ruin their flower-like, pure-as-jade complexions.’” Ah Zhu laughed. “Sister Youcao, is the madame at home?” [The exact phrase Ah Zhu uses is not ‘madame’, but ‘maternal uncle’s wife’, which is her relationship to Murong Fu.] The servant girl, Youcao, cast a few glances at Duan Yu, turned her head towards Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, then laughed, “The madame also said, ‘Those two brats also brought a strange man to the Highland Manor of the Camellias. Go and chop off that man’s legs immediately!’” Before she finished the sentence, she began to laugh out loud.

Patting her heart, Ah Bi said, “Sister Youcao, don’t scare us! Is that really true?”

Ah Zhu laughed, “Ah Bi, don’t be scared. If the madame was really at home, how would this girl have the courage to be so impish and mischievous? Little Sister Youcao, where did the madame go?” Youcao laughed, “Pooh! How old are you? Are you fit to be my big sister? Clever little demon that you are, you actually managed to guess that the madame isn’t at home.” She let out a light sigh. “Sister Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, it’s such a rare occasion that you two can come visit. I really want to keep you two here for a few days, but...” As she spoke, she shook her head. Ah Bi said, “I really want to spend some extra time with you too! Sister Youcao, whenever you are able to come pay a visit to us, I’ll accompany you three days and three nights without even getting sleepy, alright?” As they spoke, Ah Zhu and Ah Bi

went ashore. Ah Bi whispered quietly into Youcao's ears. Youcao let out a sudden laugh, then glanced at Duan Yu. Ah Bi immediately blushed scarlet. Pulling Ah Zhu with one hand and Ah Bi with the other, she laughed, "Let's go inside." Ah Bi turned her head and said, "Young Gentleman Duan, please wait and rest here for a bit. We'll be back soon."

Duan Yu replied, "Okay!" He watched as the three girls happily walked hand-in-hand into the forest of flowers.

He too walked ashore. After first checking to make sure no one was about, he relieved himself by the side of a tall tree. He sat next to the boat for a while, slowly growing bored. He thought to himself, "Why don't I go check out what types of extraordinary camellia flowers they have here?" He began to stroll around and view the sights. Aside from camellia flowers, there were no other flowers or plants here, not even the most commonly seen plants such as the morning-glory, climbing roses, or red roses. But all of the camellia flowers were very mundane and not the least bit extraordinary. The only thing extraordinary was their quantity. After walking for one or two hundred meters, the diversity of the camellias improved, and occasionally there were some high-quality ones, but even those were not planted properly. He thought to himself, "This manor is named after camellia flowers, but they have absolutely ruined these perfectly fine camellias."

Then, he thought to himself, "I need to go back. If Ah Zhu and Ah Bi can't find me upon returning, they'd be really worried." Turning around, he headed back, but after taking a few steps, he exclaimed to himself, "How terrible!" During his journey through the sea of flowers, he had only paid attention to the scenery, and not to the path he had taken. Two small roads forked away from each other, one headed east, the other headed west. He didn't know which one was the road he had originally taken. It would be a bit difficult for him to retrace his steps and return to the place where the

boat was anchored. He thought to himself, "Let me go to the water's edge first."

But the farther he walked, the more he felt he was going in the wrong direction. All of the camellias he saw were new ones that he hadn't seen previously. Just as he was starting to get worried, he suddenly heard someone speaking from a forested area to his left. It was Ah Zhu's voice. Duan Yu was overjoyed. He thought to himself, "I'll wait here for them a while. After they're done chatting, we'll leave together."

He heard Ah Zhu say, "The young master is in good health and has a healthy appetite. These past two months, he has been practicing the 'Dog Beating Staff' technique of the Beggars' Clan. It seems he will soon spar with the members of the Beggars' Clan." Duan Yu thought to himself, "Ah Zhu is talking about the affairs of Young Master Murong. I shouldn't eavesdrop on other people's private affairs, and should walk a bit farther away. But I can't go too far, or else I won't know when they are done talking."

Just at this moment, he heard the sound of a gentle sigh from a female voice.

Instantly, Duan Yu's entire body involuntarily trembled. His heart began to beat frantically, and he thought to himself, "What an incredibly lovely sigh that was! How can there be such a beautiful sound in the world?" That voice gently asked, "Where is he headed this time?" After having heard her let out a sigh, Duan Yu's mind was shaken. Now, hearing her say this sentence, he felt as though all the blood in his body was boiling. He felt a sour, bitter feeling in his heart, and an unspeakable degree of envy and jealousy. "She clearly is asking about Young Master Murong. She's so concerned about him and cares so much about him. Young Master Murong, how is it that you have been blessed with such incredibly good fortune?"

Ah Zhu said, "When the young master left, he said he was headed to Luoyang to meet with some masters of the

Beggars' Clan. Big Brother Deng went with him as well. Miss, set your heart at ease."

The female slowly said, "The Beggars' Clan possesses two divine skills: The 'Dog Beating Staff' technique, and the 'Eighteen Dragon-Subduing Palms' technique. These two are secret skills which are not taught to others. Even if we compile all of the information in your 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment' and our 'Jade Cavern Library', we would only be able to piece together some fragmentary, incomplete staff techniques and palm techniques. We would have no information at all about how the internal energy is supposed to be generated. How, exactly, does your young master practice the technique?" [Note: The 'library' in 'Jade Cavern Library' comes from a character 'huan' that is typically used to refer to a library of fairies and immortal sages that contains many precious, rare, and often mystical books. The name is a very elegant one, but very difficult to reproduce while being both 'fluid' and 'complete in meaning', and I have translated it on the basis of the former.]

Ah Zhu said, "The young master said, 'The internal energy component of the 'Dog Beating Staff' was invented by human beings. Why can't I figure out how it works on my own? Since I possess the staff techniques, it shouldn't be too hard for me to understand the internal energy component.'" Duan Yu said, "Young Master Murong's words make some sense. He probably is an extremely talented, extremely ambitious person."

That female let out yet another soft sigh. "Even if he's able to figure it out, it would take eight or ten years. How can it be accomplished in such a short time? Did you see the young master practicing the technique? Were there any sluggish, awkward-looking parts?" Ah Zhu replied, "The staff technique was executed extremely quickly by the young master. From the beginning to the end, he executed it smoothly and gracefully." The female let out a cry. "That's

not good! He...he really executed the technique very quickly?" Ah Zhu said, "Yes, why? Is that wrong?" The female said, "Naturally, that's wrong. Although I don't know the internal energy component to the Dog Beating Staff, judging from the staff techniques themselves, there are several parts where the slower the techniques are executed, the better. There are some other parts which fluctuate between being slow and being fast; in the fast movements there is hidden slowness, and within the slow movements quickness is hidden. There's no question about that. He...if he just focuses on executing the technique very quickly in fighting with the experts of the Beggars' Clan, I fear...I fear... you two...can you think of a way to bring a message to him?"

Ah Zhu let out a groan. "We don't know what route the young master is taking or where he is passing by. We don't even know if he's already met with the elders of the Beggars' Clan. Before he left, the young master said that the Beggars' Clan was wrongly accusing him of having murdered their Vice-Clan Leader, a man surnamed Ma. His purpose in going to Luoyang was to defend himself against these chargers, and not necessarily to fight against them. Otherwise, he and brother Deng, despite being heroes, would be unable to overcome the sheer advantage in numbers which the Beggars' Clan possesses. I'm just worried that he wouldn't be able to fully explain everything, and that the two sides will become estranged..." Ah Bi said, "Miss, is it really so improper for him to execute the Dog Beating Staff technique very quickly?" The female said, "Naturally, it is definitely improper. What else is there to say? He...why didn't he come and visit me before leaving?" As she spoke, she lightly stamped her feet, seemingly very agitated and deeply concerned, but her voice remained tender, soft, and lovely to hear.

Duan Yu was extremely astonished. He thought to himself, "In Dali, everyone spoke of 'Gusu's Murong family'

with the utmost reverence and fear. But from the words of this girl, it sounds as though Young Master Murong needs her advice and her pointers on martial arts. Can it be that such a young girl possesses such an incredibly high level of ability?" Lost in thought, he suddenly bumped his head into a tree branch. He couldn't help but let out a cry. He hurriedly shut his mouth, but it was too late. The female asked, "Who is it?"

Duan Yu knew that he was unable to hide, and so coughed and said from within the thicket, "I am Duan Yu. I was touring your respected manor's camellias, and accidentally arrived here. Please forgive me."

The female said in a low voice, "Ah Zhu, is it the gentleman who arrived with you two?" Ah Zhu hurriedly said, "It is. Miss, don't mind him. We'll leave immediately." The female said, "Wait. I'm going to write him a letter and explain to him that if he really gets into a fight against the Beggars' Clan, he must not use the Dog Beating Staff technique no matter what. He needs to use his own original skills. Even if he's unable to 'Use the opponent's skills, and exercise them upon the opponent', there's no other option. Take the letter and think of a way to get it to him." Ah Zhu hesitantly said, "This...well...the madame once gave orders..."

The female said, "What? You only obey the madame's commands and ignore mine?" In her voice was the slightest hint of anger. Ah Zhu hurriedly said, "Miss, as long as you keep the madame from finding out, your humble servant will naturally follow your orders, especially seeing as how this is beneficial to our master." The female said, "Come with me to the study room to prepare the letter." Ah Zhu still seemed very hesitant, and only reluctantly said, "Alright."

After hearing that first sigh, Duan Yu was becoming only more and more enthralled by this girl. Hearing that she was about to leave, he feared that he would never be able to meet her again. This would be something which he would

regret all his life. Even if it were to mean risking being blamed as too forward and bold, he had to see this girl with his own eyes. Summoning up his courage, he said, "Sister Ah Bi, can you stay here with me for a bit?" As he spoke, he walked out from the thicket.

Upon hearing him walk towards them, the female let out a startled cry and hurriedly turned her back to him.

After leaving the thicket, Duan Yu saw a maiden who wore a pale, pinkish gray garment. Her face was turned towards the flowers, her form was slim and slender, with long hair hanging over her back and gently tied together with a silvery hairpin. Gazing at this maiden's back, Duan Yu couldn't help but feel as though she was enveloped by light mist and clouds, as though she really weren't a person of the mortal world at all. He deeply bowed and said, "Duan Yu pays his respects to you, Miss."

The girl stamped on the ground with her left foot. "Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, this is all your fault. You know I do not associate with male strangers." As she spoke, she walked forwards. After a few twists and turns, her form gradually disappeared within the dense growth of camellia flowers.

A small smile on her lips, Ah Bi said, "Young Gentleman Duan, this young lady has a really bad temper. Let's leave quickly." Ah Zhu also softly laughed, "Thank you very much for rescuing us from this predicament. If you hadn't, Ms. Wang would have forced us to deliver a message on her behalf. Our petty little lives would have been put at risk."

Duan Yu had summoned all of his courage to rush out like that, but then was scolded by the girl. He felt deeply snubbed, and was worried that Ah Zhu and Ah Bi would blame him as well. He didn't expect that the two of them would actually be grateful towards him instead. Only, although that maiden was by now far away, her pretty shadow still seemed to be before his eyes, filling his heart with melancholy. He dully watched as her back disappeared into the clusters of flowers.

Ah Bi gently tugged on his sleeves, but Duan Yu still remained in a daze. Ah Zhu laughed, "Young Gentleman Duan, let's go!" Duan Yu's entire body jumped. Only after calming himself did he say, "Right, right. Are we really leaving?" Ah Zhu and Ah Bi walked in the front, leaving him with no option but to follow them. With each step he took, he looked back, filled with a reluctance to leave.

The three of them returned to their small boat. Ah Zhu and Ah Bi picked up their oars and rowed out. Duan Yu gazed at the camellias on the shore, thinking to himself, "If I, Duan Yu, am an unlucky man, how could I have had the great fortune to hear that girl's sighs and her words, much less see her goddess-like form? But if I am a lucky man, why is it that I didn't even have the chance to see her face?" As the camellias grew more and more distant, his heart became more and more downcast as well.

Suddenly, Ah Zhu let out a startled cry. "The madame... the madame has returned." Turning his head, Duan Yu saw a fast ship flying towards them. In the blink of an eye, it drew near. On the front of the ship's bow was painted an innumerable amount of multicolored flowers. When the boat drew nearer, it became evident that these, too, were camellia flowers. Ah Zhu and Ah Bi stood up, bowing their heads and staring at their feet, appearing to be extremely respectful. Ah Bi repeatedly gestured towards Duan Yu, telling him to stand up as well. Smiling, Duan Yu shook his head. "After the master comes out and speaks, I will naturally rise to my feet. A real man cannot be too humble and modest."

A female voice shouted out from the fast ship, "What male has the audacity to charge into the Highland Manor of the Camellias? Can it be that he doesn't know that any male who comes uninvited will have both his legs cut off?" The voice was very stately and majestic, but was also very clear, melodious, and pleasing to the ear. Duan Yu replied in a loud and clear voice, "I am Duan Yu. I temporarily took refuge in

your honored abode, and had no intention of charging in. I sincerely thank you." The woman said, "Your last name is Duan?"

In her voice was a hint of astonishment. Duan Yu replied, "Precisely so!"

The woman said, "Hmph! Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, so it's you two brats. That boy, Murong Fu, refuses to learn how to act properly. Sneaking and sly, he specializes in doing bad things!" Ah Zhu replied, "Reporting to Madame, this servant was pursued by enemies and passed by the Highland Manor of the Camellias. Our young master has left, and this matter truly has nothing to do with him at all." The woman laughed coldly. "Hmph. Nothing more than sweet words and blandishments. Don't be so hasty to leave. Come with me." Ah Zhu and Ah Bi replied simultaneously, "Yes, Madame." They paddled their small boat towards the fast ship. Actually, they had not travelled too far from the manor, and in a short time both ships successively docked at the shore.

The sound of jewelry clinking against each other could be heard, and many females in green clothes exited the fast ship. All of them were dressed as servants, and each of them wielded a longsword in their hands. In the twinkling of an eye, their bared swords covered the ground like frost, light of their blades reflecting onto the flowers. Nine pairs of servants came out in total. The eighteen of them formed two lines, holding their swords at waist-level, pointed upwards. After they finished lining up, a woman left the ship.

Upon seeing this woman's appearance, Duan Yu couldn't help but let out an involuntarily cry of startlement. He was temporarily tongue-tied, feeling as though he had entered the dream world. This woman was dressed in light yellow. In her clothes and in her decorations, she seemed exceedingly similar to the jade statue within the cavern in Mt. Wuliang of Dali. Only, this female was a beautiful married woman who appeared to be not quite forty years of age, whereas the jade statue portrayed a girl of eighteen or nineteen. After his

initial surprise, Duan Yu took another look at this beautiful woman. Compared to the jade statue, her eyebrows, lips, and nose were not as peerlessly gorgeous, and obviously there was an age difference as well. In addition, her face showed the marks of hardship suffered during her journey through life. Nonetheless, there was still a fifty or sixty percent resemblance. Seeing him stare at Madame Wang without blinking, Ah Zhu and Ah Bi felt that he was really being too impolite, and in their hearts both of them were groaning. They repeatedly gestured towards him, telling him not to stare, but Duan Yu's eyes remained fixed on Madame Wang's face.

The woman glanced at him, then coldly said, "This person is totally without courtesy. Later, chop off both his legs, gouge out his eyes, and rip out his tongue." A servant bowed and said, "Yes!"

Duan Yu's heart sunk. "If she really wants to kill me, fine. But to chop off my legs, gouge out my eyes, and tear out my tongue, putting me in a half-dead, half-living state, would be a really, really bad thing." Only now did fear truly enter his heart. Turning around, he glanced at Ah Zhu and Ah Bi. Both of their faces had turned a deathly pale color and were transfixed with fear.

After Madame Wang left the cabin, two more servant girls followed her out, each holding a set of metal chains in their hands. They dragged two chained males from within the cabin. Both of the males were bound by their hands and appeared to be very dejected. One man had a delicate and pretty face, seeming like a scion of a wealthy family. The other person, Duan Yu recognized. He was a disciple of Mt. Wuliang's Sword Sect named Tang Guangxiong. Duan Yu was amazed. "This person resides in Dali. How is it that he was captured by Madame Wang and brought to Jiangnan?"

Madame Wang said to Tang Guangxiong, "You are obviously from Dali. Why do you deny it?" Tang Guangxiong said, "I'm from Yunnan. My hometown is within the borders

of the Great Song and is not part of Dali.” Madame Wang asked, “How far is your hometown from Dali?” Tang Guangxiong said, “Four hundred li or so.” Madame Wang said, “If you aren’t over five hundred li away, you might as well be considered a person of Dali. Bury him alive beneath our camellias as fertilizer.” Tang Guangxiong loudly shouted, “What on earth have I done? Tell me clearly, otherwise I will not be able to close my eyes even in death.” Madame Wang coldly laughed, “Anyone I meet who is from Dali or who has the surname Duan will be buried alive. Why did you come to Suzhou? After you did come to Suzhou, how dare you speak with a Dali accent and make a loud commotion at the upstairs of the tavern? Even though you aren’t from Dali yourself, you are a neighbor of Dali. I’ll treat you the same way I would treat them.”

Duan Yu said to himself, “Ah hah, you obviously are directing that to me. There’s no need for you to ask, I’ll just admit it point-blank.” He loudly shouted, “I am from Dali, and my surname is Duan. If you want to bury me, go ahead and be quick about it!” Madame Wang coldly said, “You already reported your name, saying that you are called Duan Yu. Hmph. No person from Dali who is of the Duan family will be allowed to die so easily.”

She waved her hand, and a slave girl pulled Tang Guangxiong away. Tang Guangxiong must have had his acupoints sealed or sustained severe injuries; he wasn’t able to resist in the slightest. He only shouted, “There’s no such rule in the world! There are millions of people within Dali, can you kill them all?” But as he was dragged deeper and deeper into the sea of flowers, his voice gradually grew faint, then disappeared.

Madame Wang inclined her head slightly and said to the delicate looking man, “What do you have to say yourself?” That man suddenly fell to both his knees, kneeling in front of her. “My father is an official in Beijing, and I am his only son. Madame, I beg you to spare my life. If you have any

instructions, my father will definitely carry them out.” Madame Wang coldly said, “Your father is a powerful official within the imperial court. Do you think I don’t know that? There’s an easy way for you to be spared. This very day, go back to your home and immediately kill your official wife. Then, tomorrow, immediately marry your secret lover, Ms. Miao, and take her as your wife. The wedding ceremony needs to be complete and done properly; the six ceremonial rites must be conducted, and the three documents must be completed. Will you accept?” The man said, “This...I can’t really bear to kill my wife, and my father and mother would definitely not allow me to formally marry Ms. Miao. Isn’t this my...” Madame Wang said, “Take him away and bury him alive!” The servant holding his chain said, “Yes!” Tugging at the chain, she started to drag him away. The man was so frightened, his entire body quivered. “I...I agree, alright?” Madame Wang said, “Xiaocui, escort him to Suzhou. I want you to personally witness him killing his wife and marrying Ms. Miao before returning.” Xiaocui replied, “Yes!” She dragged the man towards another small boat on the shore.

The man begged, “Madame, be merciful. My wife has no enmity with you, and you don’t know Ms. Miao. Why must you help her like this and force me to kill my wife? I...I’ve never been acquainted with you, much less...much less have dared to offend you.” Madame Wang said, “Since you already have a wife, you shouldn’t have entangled yourself with another maiden. Since you deceived the girl with your flowery words and lies, then you definitely must take her as your wife. If I don’t hear about these types of things happening, then it doesn’t matter. But if I do find out, then of course I will handle the situation. You aren’t the first one I’ve done this to. What do you have to grumble about? Xiaocui, how many times have we done this?” Xiaocui said, “I have done this seven times at places such as Changshou, Danyang, Wuxi, and Jiaxing. Xiaolan and Xiaoshi have also overseen a few of these events.”

Hearing that this was how she always handled this sort of affairs, that man could only moan and groan. Rowing the oars, Xiaocui propelled her boat off into the distance.

Seeing how this Madame Wang handled matters in totally irrational ways, Duan Yu was boggled, totally struck dumb. The only thing which filled his mind was four words. "This is absolutely preposterous." Unconsciously, he blurted those words out. "This is absolutely preposterous. This is absolutely preposterous!" Madame Wang let out a humph. "There are even more absolutely preposterous things in the world. Many more!"

Duan Yu was both disappointed and miserable. That day, when he found the statue of his dear goddess within the jade cavern of Mt. Wuliang, his heart was filled with admiration. The person in front of him appeared similar to the jade statue, but in speech and demeanor acted as though she were a demoness or an evil spirit.

Lowering his head, he was lost in thought. Four servant girls left the cabin of the fast ship, each holding a vase of flowers. Duan Yu, upon seeing them, was startled. All four vases were filled with rare, famous, and extremely difficult to obtain breeds of camellia flowers. Dali possessed more and better camellia flowers than any other place in the world, and within the South-Subduing Palace alone were innumerable camellias. Duan Yu was long since used to seeing them. When bored, he would listen to the ten famous gardeners who served at the palace comment on and appraise the camellias. Naturally, he fully understood the differences between superb breeds of camellias and poor breeds. His understanding in this field was as deep as that of a farmer's understanding of the differences between beans and wheat, or a fisherman's understanding of the difference between fish and shrimp. After strolling about the Highland Manor of the Camellias for some time, he was unable to find a single truly outstanding breed of camellias, and had long since decided that the manor did not live up to its name. But

at this moment, seeing those four vases, he inwardly said, "Now that is more like it."

Madame Wang said, "Xiaocha, it was very difficult for us to obtain these four 'Full Moon' [Manyue] camellias. They need to be taken good care of." The servant named Xiaocha said, "Yes!" Duan Yu felt that these words were too amateurish and let out a sneer. Madame Wang said, "Because the wind on the lake was too strong, we've kept these four flowers within the cabin for many days now. It's been a while since they've gotten some sunlight. Quick, take them to a place where they can drink in some sunlight. Add some extra fertilizer as well." Xiaocha repeated, "Yes!" Duan Yu could no longer hold in his mirth, and began to roar with laughter.

Madame Wang felt that his laughter was weird and asked, "What are you laughing at?" Duan Yu replied, "I laugh at the fact that you know nothing about camellias, but insist on planting them. For such an exquisite specimen to fall into your hands is truly a waste, like burning a zither for firewood or cooking a crane for meat. This really disheartens me! What a pity, what a waste. I feel so sorry for it." Madame Wang angrily said, "I don't know anything about camellias? So you do?" But suddenly, her heart stirred. "Wait," she said to herself, "He's from Dali and his surname is Duan. Maybe he really does understand camellias." But her words were still stubborn. "The name of this manor is the 'Highland Manor of the Camellias'. Camellias populate this place, inside and out. See how exuberant and brilliant they are! Why do you say that I don't understand camellias?" Duan Yu smiled, "Commonplace flowers of low quality will naturally flourish. But the four vases of camellias you have there are exquisite specimens. If amateurs like you are able to properly plant and take care of them, then my surname isn't Duan!"

Madame Wang exceedingly loved camellia flowers. She didn't care about the cost; wherever she went, she would

purchase beautiful specimens to take home. But when the new camellias arrived, not a single one of the famous and rare specimens would thrive or flourish. Usually, within a year or so, they would wither and die or be at death's gate. She was always vexed by this problem. Now, hearing Duan Yu's words, her anger turned to joy. She took two steps forward and asked, "What is so special about these four vases of camellias? What must I do to make them flourish?" Duan Yu replied, "If you want to consult with me, then you need to follow the proper etiquette for asking advice. If you want to threaten and compel me into answering, go ahead and chop off my legs first. You can always ask me afterwards."

Madame Wang angrily said, "What's so difficult about chopping your legs off? Xiaoshi, chop his left foot off first!" The servant girl named Xiaoshi replied in the affirmative, then advanced towards Duan Yu, sword in hand. Ah Bi hurriedly said, "Madame, don't ya be doin' that, yeah. If ya hurt this fella, he's real stubborn-like and would rather die than speak." Madame Wang only wanted to scare Duan Yu in the first place. With a wave of her hand, she beckoned Xiaoshi back.

Duan Yu laughed, "Go ahead and chop off my legs, then place them next to those four vases of white camellias. They really will serve as a superb fertilizer. These white flowers will grow bigger and bigger. Maybe they'll flourish into a sea of camellias! Haha, beautiful, wonderful, brilliant!"

Madame Wang originally really was thinking of doing just that, but Duan Yu's every word was filled with irony and sarcasm, rendering her speechless. After being stunned for a moment, she said, "What are you babbling about? What, exactly, is so special about these four vases of mine? Tell me. If you are correct, I'll pay the proper respects to you then."

Duan Yu replied, "For starters, Madame Wang, you made the mistake of calling these flowers 'Full Moon' camellias. If

you don't even recognize what the exact breed of flowers you have are, how can you be said to understand flowers? One of the flowers is named 'Red Makeup, White Wrappings'. Another is called 'Clawing a Beautiful Woman's Face'." Intrigued, Madame Wang asked, "'Clawing A Beautiful Woman's Face?' Is there really such a weird flower name? Which one is it?"

Duan Yu said, "If you want to ask for my advice, you need to follow proper etiquette."

Duan Yu had mocked her mercilessly, without her being able to defend herself, but upon hearing that one of her four vases of flowers had such a unique name, Madame Wang was filled with delight. Smiling, she said, "Fine! Xiaoshi, order the cooks to prepare a banquet at the 'Pavilion of Glorious Clouds' in order to entertain Young Gentleman Duan." After acknowledging the order, Xiaoshi left.

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi gazed at each other. Seeing that Duan Yu had not only escaped death, but was also now being treated as a guest by Madame Wang, both of them were overjoyed at the surprise.

The servant who had taken Tang Guangxiong returned and reported, "That person surnamed Tang from Dali has already been buried beneath a red camellia in front of the 'Pavilion of Rosy Clouds'." Duan Yu's heart went cold. Madame Wang didn't seem to care at all. She simply nodded, then said, "Young Gentleman Duan, please come this way!" Duan Yu said, "I dared to disturb you; I am very blessed indeed that you, my host, are so forgiving." Madame Wang said, "An able and worthy person has come, bringing great honor and glory to the flowers and ramparts of the Highland Manor of Camellias." The two of them spoke courteously to each other as they walk, not revealing a shred of the life-and-death danger Duan Yu had been in just moments ago.

With Madame Wang accompanying Duan Yu, the two passed by a forest of flowers, a stone bridge, and a small

alleyway before arriving in front of a small pavilion. Below the eaves of the pavilion, Duan Yu saw an inscribed wooden board with the words, "Pavilion of Glorious Clouds", written in blackish-green ink in the seal-script style. Camellia flowers blossomed all around the pavilion. But in Dali, these camellia flowers were considered to be third or fourth class rubbish. Their appearance totally clashed with the refined-looking and elegantly constructed pavilion.

Madame Wang actually seemed to be very pleased with herself. "Young Gentleman Duan, in your Dali there are many camellia flowers, but I'm afraid that compared to my place, there still aren't quite as many." Duan Yu nodded. "It's true that we don't plant this sort of camellia flowers in Dali." Madame Wang chortled, "Really?" Duan Yu replied, "In Dali, even country bumpkins know that these camellias are not of very high quality, and too mundane to plant." The color of Madame Wang's face changed, and she angrily said, "What did you just say? You say that these flowers of mine are of poor quality? Aren't these words of yours too...too infuriating and insulting?"

Duan Yu said, "Madame, if you don't believe me, that's your choice." Pointing to a gorgeous, five-colored camellia in front of the pavilion, he said, "This flower, you no doubt treat as a precious treasure, right? Hm. Actually, the jade railing next to the camellia is made from actual Hotan jade. It's very beautiful, very beautiful." He was gushing with praise for the jade railing next to the camellia while not saying much about the flower itself; this was akin to a person, while viewing someone else's calligraphy, praise how dark the ink was and how famous and rare the paper was.

This camellia was both red and white, both violet and yellow. The variety of colors it possessed were magnificent and resplendent. Madame Wang had always treated it as a treasure. Now, seeing Duan Yu showing such disdain for it, she immediately furrowed her eyebrows, emitting a murderous look from her eyes. Duan Yu said, "Madame, if I

may ask, what is this flower known as here in Jiangnan?" Madame Wang vehemently said, "We don't have any particularly special name for it. We just call it the 'Five-Colored Camellia'." Duan Yu smiled. "But we in Dali have a name for it. We call it the 'Failed Scholar'."

Madame Wang spat. "Bah! Such an ugly name! You must have made that up. This flower is gorgeous to behold. Why would it be called a 'Failed Scholar'?" Duan Yu said, "Madame, please take a look and count for yourself. How many colors do the blossoms of this camellia flower have?" Madame Wang said, "I counted them long ago. There's at least fifteen or sixteen." Duan Yu said, "There are exactly seventeen colors. In Dali, there is famous camellia flower called the 'Eighteen Scholars'. It is one of one of the highest grade camellias in the world. Each plant has precisely eighteen flowers, and each flower is of a different color. The red flower is totally red; the violent flowers are totally purple. There's not a single hint of intermingled color. In addition, the shape of each of the eighteen blossoms is different as well, with each possessing their own unique beauty. When they bloom, they bloom at the same time; when they wither, all eighteen flowers wither at the same time. Madame, have you seen it before?" Madame Wang had been listening, stunned. She shook her head. "Camellias like this actually exist? I've never even heard of it!"

Duan Yu said, "Compared to the 'Eighteen Scholars', there are some other famous flowers that are similar to it in quality. The 'Thirteen Grand Protectors' are camellia plants that have thirteen blossoms, each with a totally different color. The 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea' refers to camellia plants with eight different colored blossoms. The 'Seven Celestial Maidens' refers to camellia plants with seven different colored blossoms. The 'Three Heroes of Hardship' have three blossoms, and the 'Two Qiao Sisters' have two blossoms; one red, one white. For all of these camellia flowers, the color of each blossom must be pure. If

there's a hint of white within a red flower, or a blush of red in a white flower, it is considered a low-grade version." Madame Wang couldn't help but be carried away and raptured by his explanations. Lifting her head up, she quietly whispered to herself, "Why didn't he ever tell me this?"

[Translator's note: All of the above refer to famous historical or mythical personages in ancient China, each with many legends attached to them. The 'Thirteen Grand Protectors' refers to a group of thirteen legendary warriors during the Five Dynasties period who protected Li Cunxu, who proclaimed himself Emperor Zhuangzhong of the Later Tang dynasty. The 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea' is a very famous story in its own right. The 'Seven Celestial Maidens' are all daughters of the emperor of Heaven. The 'Three Heroes of Hardship' refers to Li Jing (who later became deified) and his two sworn brothers. The 'Two Qiao Sisters' refers to two lendararily beautiful sisters of the Qiao family during the Three Kingdoms period. The younger sister married Zhou Yu; the older sister was married to Sun Ce, Sun Quan's older brother.]

Duan Yu continued, "Within the 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea', there must be a deep violet flower and a light red flower. These two represent Iron-Crutchd Li and Female Celestial He. If this isn't the case, even if all eight flowers have different colors, they cannot be called the 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea'. They would simply be called the 'Eight Precious Adornments'. They are also considered to be famous flowers, but are a level inferior to the 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea'." Madame Wang said, "So that's how it is."

Duan Yu continued, "Now, let's talk about the 'Three Heroes of Hardship'. There's differences between high quality and low quality versions of these flowers as well. In authentic versions, the violet flower must be the largest in size, symbolizing Qiu Ranke. The white flower is second,

symbolizing Li Jing. The red flower is the most delicate and the smallest, as it represents lady Hong Fu. If the red flower is larger than the violet flower or the white flower, then the flower is considered to be of a low quality, and has a much lower status ranking." Duan Yu spoke of these flowers as though he were enumerating his own family's valuables, because these flowers were indeed treasures of the Duan family. Naturally, he was very familiar with them. Madame Wang listened to him talk with keen pleasure. She sighed, "I haven't even seen low quality flowers, much less high quality ones."

Duan Yu pointed towards the five-colored camellia. "This flower not only has one less color than the 'Eighteen Scholars', but the flowers are not pure in color. They bloom at different times, and are all of different sizes. In every aspect, it attempts to imitate the 'Eighteen Scholars', but is never able to match up. Isn't that a sad, miserable thing? Thus, we call this flower a 'Failed Scholar'." Madame Wang couldn't help but let out a breath, then laughed, "This flower's name is really too acrimonious and unkind. Most likely, you scholars came up with it."

By this point in time, Madame Wang had full faith of Duan Yu's knowledge of camellia flowers. She immediately escorted him into the 'Pavilion of Glorious Clouds'. Duan Yu saw that the furnishings upstairs were rich and beautiful, with a large painting of a peacock spreading its feathers in the middle of the room and two matching poetic lines carved in wood at each side of the painting. The lines read, "A dense cloud of leaves coats the land, even the snow is jealous of the camellia's beauty." Very shortly, the banquet began. Madame Wang invited Duan Yu to take the seat of honor, while she herself took a right-hand seat to keep him company.

The dishes prepared at the banquet were very different from the ones which Ah Zhu and Ah Bi had earlier prepared. The dishes Ah Zhu and Ah Bi prepared were very light and

refined, showing great craftsmanship in simple dishes. But the banquet dishes at the 'Pavilion of Glorious Clouds' emphasized luxuriousness, with such rarities as bear paws and shark fins. Every dish was made from rare and precious ingredients. Duan Yu, being a scion of the royal family, had become accustomed to eating rare and precious dishes since birth. In his mind, the banquet here was actually inferior to the food the two girls prepared at the 'Pavilion of Zither Melodies.'

After three rounds of drinks, Madame Wang asked, "The Duan family of Dali is a famous, aristocratic family of the martial world. Why is it that you do not study martial arts?" Duan Yu replied, "There are a large number of people in Dali who have the surname Duan. Only the royal descendants of the imperial family study martial arts. Commoners like me do not study martial arts." Whether he would live or die was wholly under the control of this woman. Being in such a humiliating position, he had decided that no matter what he could not reveal his real identity, for fear of degrading the fame and prestige of his uncle and his father. Madame Wang said, "You are a commoner?" Duan Yu replied, "I am." Madame Wang said, "Do you know any members of the royal Duan family?" Duan Yu replied, "None whatsoever."

Madame Wang was lost in thought for some time, then changed the topic. "Earlier, you were speaking about the various merits and qualities of camellia flowers, causing me to suddenly see the light. The flower artisans of Suzhou from whom I acquired these four vases of flowers called these flowers 'Full Moon' flowers, but you said that one is named 'Red Makeup, White Wrappings', and that another is named 'Clawing a Beautiful Woman's Face'. I don't know how they can be told apart, and would like to ask for your advice."

Duan Yu replied, "The plant with the large white flowers with faint black spots is the one known as the 'Full Moon' flower. Those faint black spots are the cassia twigs which grow on the moon. That other plant with white flowers which

has two olive-pit sized black spots on the petals is known as the 'Beautiful Eyes' flower." Madame Wang happily said, "This is a very good name."

Duan Yu continued, "The plant with white flowers that are sprinkled with red dots is known as 'Red Makeup, White Wrappings'. Lastly, the plant with white flowers covered by a faint green sheen and thin, hair-like strips of red is known as 'Clawing a Beautiful Woman's Face'. However, if too many of those red lines appear, the flower is no longer known as 'Clawing a Beautiful Woman's Face', but rather it is called 'Resting On a Lovely Railing'. Madame, please consider this. A beautiful woman must be gentle, refined, and warm. If by chance a scratch occasionally appears on her face, it can't be because she damaged herself while putting on makeup, nor can it be that she got into a fight with someone else. The only possible explanation is that while she was playing with her pet parrot, it scratched her. This is very normal and understandable. Thus, this flower must have a green sheen, which represents the green feathers of a parrot. But if her entire face is scratched and clawed, the only explanation is that this woman always gets into fights with others, in which case, how can she be considered to be beautiful?"

Up till now, Madame Wang was repeatedly nodding as he spoke, very pleased. Suddenly, her face sunk with anger as she shouted, "How dare you! Are you mocking me?"

Duan Yu was startled, then hurriedly said, "I wouldn't dare! I don't know how I offended you, Madame." Madame Wang angrily said, "Whose stories did you listen to, for you to come here and concoct these wild lies to insult me? Who says that a woman can no longer be considered beautiful after learning martial arts? What's so good about being gentle, refined, prim and proper?" Duan Yu was startled. "My words were based upon the standard, accepted explanation for the naming of this flower. There are many women who know martial arts that are both beautiful and stately." He didn't expect that Madame Wang found these words grating

to the ear as well, as she yelled, "So are you saying that I'm not stately?"

Duan Yu replied, "Whether or not you are stately, you yourself know best, Madame. How would I dare comment wildly? But for you to demand that a man murder his wife and wed another woman is definitely not proper at all." By now, he himself was getting angry as well, and no longer cared about what he was saying.

Madame Wang gestured with her hand, and the four girls who were serving them stepped forward in unison. Bowing, they said, "Yes, Madame?" Madame Wang said, "Take this man into your custody and away from my sight. I command that he be given the task of watering my camellias!" The four servants said in unison, "Yes, Madame!"

Madame Wang said, "Duan Yu, you are a person from Dali, and your family name is Duan. I should have killed you long ago. For the moment, I'll postpone your execution, but I'll punish you by giving you the task of taking care of all of the camellias in this manor. You need to take special care with the four which we have brought home today. Let me be clear. If a single one of these four vases of camellia flowers dies, I will chop off one of your hands. If two die, I will chop off both. If all four die, I will turn you into a limbless cripple." Duan Yu asked, "And if all four live?" Madame Wang said, "After all four flowers begin to flourish, your job will be to cultivate other famous camellias for me. 'Eighteen Scholars', 'Thirteen Grand Protectors', 'Eight Immortals Crossing the Sea', 'Seven Celestial Maidens', 'Three Heroes of Hardship', and the 'Two Qiao Sisters'. I want several of each! If you can't accomplish it, I'll tear your eyeballs out."

Duan Yu loudly objected, "These famous flowers are rarely seen, even in Dali. It will be almost impossible to find them in Jiangnan. If you can get several of each just like that, how can they be considered to be rare and precious breeds? Just go ahead and kill me now! I refuse to accept the torture of having you cut off my hands today and gouge out

my eyes tomorrow." Madame Wang loudly rebuked him, "You must be tired of living, to act so rudely in front of me. Take him away!"

The four servant girls walked towards him. Two of them grabbed him by his arms, one by his chest, with the last grabbing him by the back. All five of them descended from the top floor of the pavilion. All four of the servant girls knew martial arts, and Duan Yu found himself totally unable to resist. All he could do was secretly lament, "Damnit, damnit!"

Pushing and tugging, the four servants pulled him to a flower nursery. One servant stuck a gardening hoe in his hand, while another grabbed a watering pail. She said, "If you listen to the madame's orders and obediently water the flowers, you can keep your life. But the way you keep offending her, you are tremendously lucky that she didn't immediately order for you to be buried alive." Another servant said, "Aside from doing your duties to preserve the flowers, you aren't allowed to run about wildly within the manor. If you break into one of the restricted areas, no one will be able to save you. It's the equivalent of asking to die." The four servants lectured him in extremely solemn tones for some time before leaving. Duan Yu could only blankly stand there, not sure whether he should laugh or cry.

At Dali, he was only inferior in rank to his uncle and to his father. In the future, after his father ascended to the throne, he would become the crown prince. How could it have happened that he was kidnapped and brought to Jiangnan, almost be burned to death, then risk having his arms and legs chopped off or his eyes gouged out. As if that wasn't enough, now he was forced into being someone else's gardener. Even though he had an amiable temperament, and, in his palace, often chatted with the gardeners while watching them prune the flowers, work the earth, and spread the fertilizer, he was still a prince. In his heart, he felt that gardener's were very lowly people.

Fortunately, he was a happy person and a lively spirit by nature. Upon meeting any problems or setbacks, at most he would only be dispirited for a short while before becoming happy again. He said to himself, "At the jade cavern of Mt. Wuliang, I already kowtowed and accepted the dear goddess as my master. Aside from the age issue, this Madame Wang looks very similar to her. Why don't I just think of her as my martial-uncle? It's natural for a pupil to labor hard and obey the commands of his master. Not to mention, cultivating flowers is an artistic sort of work done by literati. It's definitely much more elegant and sophisticated than waving around sabres or poking around with spears. And it's definitely ten thousand times better than being burned alive by Jiumozhi in front of Mr. Murong's tomb. The only problem is, these flowers are really too inferior in quality. Having the prince of Dali take care of them is a waste of talent, like killing a scrawny chicken using a giant blade meant for butchering cattle. Haha, actually, can I be really be considered a cattle-butcher blade? What sort of flower-planting talent do I have, anyhow?"

Then, he thought to himself, "If I stay at the Highland Manor of the Camellias for a bit longer, there's always the chance that I might have the good fortune of seeing that girl who wore the pale pinkish grey dress. This can be called, 'Duan Yu, how do you know that planting flowers won't be a lucky thing for you?'"

Considering the question of whether he was lucky or unlucky, Duan Yu grabbed a handful of grass. "Let's see how long it will be before I have the chance to see that girl." He began to pass the grass from his left hand to his right, then from his right hand to his left, trying to tell his fortune. After divining for some time, he ended up with a 'Gen' divinatory symbol, with an upper 'Gen' and a lower 'Gen'. He thought to himself, "'You shall see her back, but you will not win her body; you shall go to her courtyard, but you will not see her

person. No fault.' This divination is really appropriate. Even though I won't see her, in the end, it won't be my fault."

He started over. This time, he ended up with a 'Kun' divinatory symbol, along with an upper 'Dui' and a lower 'Kan' symbol. He inwardly groaned, "'Hard-pressed down amongst plants, as though you had entered a secluded valley. You will not present yourself within three years.' I won't even see her within three years. I really am very hard-pressed." Then he thought, "If I can't see her within three years, that means I'll see her in the fourth year. There's plenty of time in the future. Why think of myself as being hard-pressed?"

Since his divinations were very unfavorable, he dared divine no more. Humming a little melody, he picked up the hoe and began to stroll about aimlessly. He thought to himself, "Madame Wang told me to make those four vases of white flowers flourish. These four plants truly are famous breeds. I need to find a very graceful place to plant them, so as to show them off in the proper setting." While strolling about, he reviewed the local scenery. Suddenly, he burst out in loud laughter. "Madame Wang doesn't know a damn thing about camellias, but insists on planting them, and even calls this place the Highland Manor of the Camellias. She doesn't even know that camellias prefer the moon, not the sun, and planted them in places where there is a lot of sun. Even if the flowers manage to somehow survive, there is no way they can flourish. Then she smothers them with fertilizer, by which point, any and all famous breeds of camellias will have been killed by her. What a waste, what a waste! But so funny, so very funny!"

He avoided the sunlight, only going to shadowy areas underneath trees and other large plants. After passing a small hill, he heard the gurgling of water. To his left-hand side was a row of green bamboo plants. The entire place was very quiet and secluded. The area was hidden in the shadow of the hill, where the sun could not reach. Madame Wang,

knowing that this place was not suitable for planting flowers, did not plant a single camellia here. Duan Yu was overjoyed. "There's no better place than this."

Returning to his starting place, he carried the flower vases one by one to where the bamboo plants were. He shattered each porcelain vase then planted each camellia along with the mud in the vases. Although he had never done this before, he had seen this done many times. Surprisingly, although he was just making it up as he went along, he did it perfectly. Within an hour's time, he finished transplanting the four white camellias next to the bamboo. He planted the 'Clawing a Beautiful Woman's Face' to the left, the 'Red Makeup, White Wrappings' and the 'Full Moon' to the right, and the 'Beautiful Eyes' flower right behind a large boulder. He said to himself, "This is like the saying, 'Only after you call and entreat her to come out many times does she appear, carrying a pipa and covering half her face.' when these plants are placed in an appropriate setting do their true beauty and charm shine." In Chinese history, flowers have always been compared to beautiful women. The art of cultivating flowers is equivalent to the art of a beautiful woman using makeup. Duan Yu came from a royal family and read many books; naturally, his understanding of these things was a level above most people.

Stretching his hands into the small stream, he washed away the dirt and mud. Taking a seat on top of the boulder, then stared at that 'Beautiful Eyes' camellia plant, turning his head this way and that to view it from every angle. Just as he was feeling proud of himself, he heard the sound of footsteps coming from a distance. Two females were walking his way. One of them said, "This place is the most quiet and secluded place here. No one ever comes..."

The sound of her voice was very pleasing to the ear. Duan Yu's heart thumped loudly. The voice obviously belonged to the girl who wore the pale pinkish grey dress which he had seen earlier in the day. Duan Yu held his breath, not daring

to make the slightest sound. He thought to himself, "She said she refuses to meet with any male strangers, and I, Duan Yu, am obviously a male stranger. For me to be able to listen to her say a few words and hear her goddess-like voice is already my infinite good fortune. No matter what, I can't let her know I am here." His head was originally leaning towards one side; now, he didn't even dare straighten his neck, and so he just left his head in that inclined position rather than risk his neck straightening and making even the slightest bit of noise, scaring that girl.

That maiden continued, "Xiaoming, what have you... have you heard, regarding news of him?" Duan Yu couldn't help but feel a sour feeling in his heart. The 'him' the maiden was referring to obviously couldn't be himself, Duan Yu; rather, it was Young Master Murong. From Madame Wang's earlier words, Young Master Murong seemed to have the given name of 'Fu', 'recover'. The maiden's question seemed to be filled with concern and tender affection for him. Duan Yu could not control the feelings of jealousy from springing forth from his core as they once more hurt his heart. Xiaoming mumbled haltingly for a long time, appearing to be very uncomfortable.

The maiden said, "Tell me! I definitely will take good care of you afterwards." Xiaoming said, "I'm afraid... I'm afraid the madame will blame me." The maiden said, "Silly girl, after you tell me, do you really think I will go tell the madame?" Xiaoming asked, "What if the madame asks you?" The maiden said, "Naturally, I still won't tell her." Xiaoming hesitated for another period of time before saying, "Your cousin, the young master went to Shaolin." The maiden said, "Shaolin? Why is it that Ah Zhu and Ah Bi said he was going to Luoyang to meet with the Beggars' Clan?" Duan Yu thought to himself, "Her cousin, the young master? Oh, Young Master Murong is her maternal cousin. The two of them must share the innocent affection of cousins, which they have had since childhood. Then... then..."

Xiaoming said, "This time, when the madame was out travelling, she came across Second Master Gongye. He said that the all the leaders of the Beggars' Clan have come to Jiangnan, intending to put on a huge show of force and question the young master about something which had to do with one of their masters. Second Master Gongye said that he received a letter from the young master. The young master wrote that he had arrived in Luoyang but was unable to find any of the leaders of the beggars, and so went to Mt. Song to visit Shaolin." The maiden said, "Why did he go to Shaolin?" Xiaoming said, "Second Master Gongye said that in the letter, the young master wrote that an old Shaolin monk died in Dali, and that Shaolin was falsely accusing Gusu's Murong family of having done the deed. The young master was very angry. Fortunately, Shaolin isn't very far away from Luoyang, so he decided to go there and clear up the matter.

The maiden said, "If he's unable to clear things up, then won't things end up in violence? Since the madame found out about this news, why did she come back home instead of rushing to Shaolin to help the young master out?" Xiaoming said, "This...well, I don't know. I imagine that it is probably because the madame doesn't like the young master." The maiden angrily said, "Hmph. Even if she doesn't like him, he's one of us. If Gusu's Murong family loses face to outsiders, will our Wang family gain anything from it?" Xiaoming did not dare to reply.

The maiden walked back and forth near the copse of bamboo plants. Suddenly, she saw the three white camellia plants which Duan Yu had planted, as well as the shattered remains of the porcelain vases. She let out a startled sound, then asked, "Who is planting camellias here?"

Duan Yu moved quickly, emerging from behind the boulder. Bowing deeply, he said, "In accordance with the madame's orders, your humble servant came here to cultivate camellia flowers. I'm sorry to have disturbed you."

Although he bowed very deeply, he stared straight ahead at her. He was afraid that the maiden would just repeat the words, "I don't associate with male strangers," then leave again, with him once more missing a wonderful opportunity.

As soon as he saw the young lady, he felt a buzzing sound in his ears. He felt as though his vision was becoming blurry, and his legs went weak. He couldn't help but sink to his knees. If he didn't exert all of his energy to keep himself straight, he would have kowtowed to her. Finally, he managed to cry out, "Dear goddess! I...I have been so miserable, dreaming about you! Master, your disciple, Duan Yu, pays respects to you!"

The girl in front of him looked totally identical to the jade statue of the jade cavern. There were no differences whatsoever. Although Madame Wang looked very similar to the jade statue, she was obviously older, and was not as beautiful. But the girl in front of him, aside from her choice of clothes, looked exactly the same as the statue. Face, eyes, nose, lips, ears, skin color, body figure, hands, feet; there was not a single difference. It was as though the jade statue had come to life. In his dreams, he had longed for the jade statue a thousand or ten thousand times. Now, seeing her before his own very eyes, he really did not know where he was. Was he on earth, or was he in heaven?

The young maiden thought he was a lunatic. Letting out a soft cry, she retreated two steps. Shocked, she said, "You... you..."

Duan Yu rose to his feet. His eyes remained locked on the young maiden, and now he saw her even more clearly than before. Only now did he realize that there were still some differences between the girl in front of him and the jade statue. The jade statue was gorgeous, seductive, and arousing; it had the power to entrance one's senses and steal one's soul. The maiden in front of him, on the other hand, was dignified and sedate, with a hint of childishness. In terms of appearances, the jade statue actually appeared

to be more animate and alive than the girl in front of him. He said, "Ever since that day in the jade cavern, when I kowtowed to your celestial statue, Dear Goddess, I felt that I was the luckiest of men. I never would have imagined that today, I would be able to see your appearance with mine own eyes. Goddesses really do exist on earth. The world isn't an empty place at all!"

The maiden said to Xiaoming, "What is he talking about? He...who is he?" Xiaoming said, "He's that bookworm which Ah Zhu and Ah Bi brought. He claimed to know how to plant camellias. The madame actually believed his rubbish." The maiden said to Duan Yu, "Bookworm, did you overhear the conversation I had with her just then?"

Duan Yu laughed, "Your humble servant has the surname of Duan, with the given name of Yu. I am a citizen of Dali, not a bookworm. Dear Goddess, I accidentally overheard the conversation between you and Sister Xiaoming. But neither of you need to worry; your humble servant won't leak a single word of your conversation. I guarantee that I will not cause sister Xiaoming to be blamed by Madame Wang."

The maiden's face sank. "Who are you calling your 'Dear Goddess'? You refuse to admit you are a bookworm? When did you ever meet me?" Duan Yu replied, "If I'm not to call you 'Dear Goddess', how should I address you?" The maiden said, "My family name is Wang. You can just call me Miss Wang."

Duan Yu shook his head. "No way. There's hundreds of millions of Miss Wang's in the world. Miss, how could I address a celestial personage such as yourself simply as 'Miss Wang'? But how am I to address you then? This is a really tough problem. How about Celestial Maiden Wang? That seems too vulgar. Princess of the Camellias? But the Great Song, Dali, Liao, Tibet, and the Western Xia all have many princesses. Which one can compare to you?"

The maiden felt as though his words were filled with poetic diction. She all the more felt he was a total

bookworm. Nonetheless, seeing him so enraptured by her and hearing him pour forth so many praises of her beauty, she couldn't help but be a little delighted. Smiling she said, "Your luck is not bad at all. My mom didn't chop your legs off."

Duan Yu said, "The madame's looks are comparable to yours, Dear Goddess. Only, her temperament is a bit too weird, and she randomly wants to kill people. It's really a bit at odds with her goddess-like appearance."

The maiden knitted her eyebrows slightly. "Hurry up and go plant camellias. Don't just stand here and jibber jabber. The two of us have important things to talk about." Her attitude indicated that she thought of him simply as a common gardener.

Duan Yu didn't think about disobeying. He just wanted to exchange a few more words with her and cast a few more glances towards her. He thought to himself, "The only way I can lure her into being whole-heartedly willing to chat with me is by discussing Young Master Murong. Aside from this, she won't care about anything else." He said, "Shaolin is the Mt. Taishan and the Big Dipper of the martial community [meaning, holds an utmost position of height and power]. Within the monastery itself, if there aren't a thousand eminent monks and expert fighters, there are at least eight hundred. Many of them have practiced the Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques. Recently, Master Xuanbei was violently murdered in Dali's Luliang prefecture, within the Shenjie Monastery. The many monks there were firm in their assertion that it was Gusu's Murong family which did the deed. For Young Master Murong to enter such an extremely risky situation by himself is very unwise.

That maiden's body actually trembled. Duan Yu didn't dare look directly at her face. He thought to himself, "She cares so much about that little brat, Murong Fu. If I see her expression, I might be so pissed that I would start crying." He watched the lower hem of her pale, pinkish grey dress

gently tremble. He heard her insurpassably gentle voice say, "Why do the monks of Shaolin falsely accuse Gusu's Murong family? Do you know? You...hurry and tell me."

Hearing her beg him in such a trembling voice, Duan Yu's heart softened, and he wanted to immediately tell her everything. But then, he reconsidered. "Actually, my knowledge in this matter is limited. All I really know is that Master Xuanbei was killed by a blow from the 'Great Veda Sceptre' technique, and that everyone agreed that only the Murong family 'uses the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.' I would finish explaining all of that in a few sentences. After I'm done explaining, she'll shoo me off to go plant camellias again, by which point it will be very difficult to come up with any other topics of conversation. I need to make a mountain out of a molehill and spend a long time talking about a simple matter. I'll just tell her a little bit each day, but also talk about all sorts of random matters and ramble on and off. I'll stretch the conversation out as long as I can, so as to get her to come talk to me every day. If she can't find me, her heart will itch and she'll be discomfited."

Duan Yu coughed and said, "I myself do not know martial arts. I don't even know the most basic of techniques, such as 'Golden Pheasant Stands Alone', or 'Black Tiger Stealing the Heart'. But I know a family friend by the surname of Zhu, whose full name is Zhu Danchen. His nickname is 'Student of Calligraphy'. He might look like a weak and scholarly bookworm like me, but he really is very good at martial arts. One day, I saw him fold his fan, invert it, then with a puffing sound, point the fan towards the shoulder of this big muscular fellow. That fellow immediately curled up into a ball, as though he had turned into a puddle of mud, totally unable to move."

The maiden said, "Right, this is the 'Cool and Refreshing Fan' technique's acupoint sealing skill. It is the thirty eighth technique, the 'Bone-Piercing Fan' technique. Invert the fan, then diagonally attack the shoulder acupoint. This Mr. Zhu

belongs to a branch of the Mt. Kunlun school of martial arts, and is a disciple of the Three Reasons Temple. Practitioners of this school of martial arts are even more formidable when using judge pens as opposed to fans. Let's get back to the main topic. There's no need to discuss martial arts with me."

If Zhu Danchen himself had been here and heard these words, he would have admired this girl from the depths of his heart. Not only had the maiden properly identified the technique he had used, she even managed to discern the origins of his martial arts and clearly explain where he had studied it. If another famous martial arts expert, such as Duan Yu's uncle, Duan Zhengming, or his father, Duan Zhengchun, they would have been astonished as well and wondered, "How is it that such a young girl has such a broad, deep, and incisive understanding of martial arts?" But Duan Yu did not know martial arts at all, so when the girl casually made those comments, he just casually listened, without even knowing if her words were correct or not. He stared at her thin eyebrows as they rose and her red lips as they moved. Whether or not her words were correct, he did not care one bit.

The maiden asked, "So what about Mr. Zhu?" Duan Yu pointed at a bluestone bench near the bamboo plants and said, "This story will take some time in the telling. Miss, why don't you move over there and take a seat? Then, I'll slowly report the events to you." The maiden said, "You ramble on and on. Why can't you just speak casually and quickly? I don't have the energy to listen to you." Duan Yu replied, "Miss, if you don't have the time today, you can come find me tomorrow. If you don't have free time tomorrow, it'll be fine if we wait a few more days. As long as the madame does not chop off my tongue, all you need to do is ask and I will tell you what you want to know."

The maiden lightly stomped her foot on the ground, then turned around and ignored him. She asked Xiaoming, "What else did the madame say?" Xiaoming replied, "The madame

said, 'Hmph, the problems are becoming bigger and bigger. He's become foes with the Beggars' Clan and enemies with Shaolin. I'm afraid that Gusu's Murong family will die...die without even a place to be buried.' The maiden hurriedly said, "Mother clearly knows that my cousin is in a dangerous, critical situation. Why doesn't she care?" Xiaoming said, "Right. Miss, I'm afraid that the madame will go looking for me. I need to leave! No matter what, please don't tell the madame what I told you. I want to be alive to serve you for a few more years." The maiden said, "Put your heart at ease. Why would I harm you?" Xiaoming paid her respects and left. Seeing a look of dread and fear on her face, Duan Yu thought to himself, "To Madame Wang, killing people is as big a deal as cutting the grass. She really does make others swoon with fear."

The maiden slowly walked to the bluestone bench, then lightly and elegantly sat down, but did not ask Duan Yu to sit as well. Duan Yu naturally did not dare to rashly sit next to her. One of the white camellias was situated very close to her, only two branch-lengths away. A beautiful woman and a famous flower; the two brought out the best of each other's beauty. Duan Yu sighed, "'The beautiful flower collapses the country, but both are beautiful.' Inferior, far inferior. In the past, the poet Li Bai used peony flowers as a metaphor for the beauty of Precious Consort Yang [Yang Guifei]. If he had the fortune to see you, Miss, he would realize that although the flower is very beautiful, it is not tender when angry, does not have a soft voice, has no joyful laughter, and is without worries and cares. The flowers are far inferior!"

The maiden quietly said, "You keep on telling me that I am beautiful, but I don't know if it's true or not." Duan Yu was totally astonished. "Only those who have no eyes cannot see beauty when beauty is placed before them. If this is the case for men, how much more must it be for you? I imagine that you have been called beautiful too many times in your life, and are bored of hearing it."

The maiden slowly shook her head, revealing a look of loneliness. She said, "No one has ever told me whether or not I am beautiful. Within the Highland Manor of the Camellias, aside from my mother and myself, everyone here is a servant. They only know me as the young missus. Why would they care if I am beautiful or ugly?" Duan Yu said, "What about outsiders?" The maiden said, "What outsiders?" Duan Yu said, "When you go outside and others see your goddess-like beauty, surely they are startled and gasp in admiration, then prostrate themselves in reverence?" The maiden said, "I never go outside. Why would I go outside? Mother doesn't allow me to, anyhow. When I go to my aunt's house to read at the 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment', I don't meet any outsiders there either. Although, some of his friends, like Big Brother Deng, Second Brother Gongye, Third Brother Bao, or Fourth Brother Feng, they...they aren't dull-witted fellows like you." As she spoke, a small smile appeared.

Duan Yu said, "Can it be that Young Master Murong...that he too has never told you how beautiful you are?"

The maiden slowly lowered her head. An indescribably soft, almost inaudible sound could be heard, followed by a few more. A few teardrops fell onto the grass, crystal clear and sparkling, appearing as though they were the early morning dew. Duan Yu no longer dared to ask any more questions, nor did he dare to say any comforting words.

After a long time, the maiden let out a quiet sigh. "He... he's a very busy person. Every day of every year, from dawn til dusk, he is always busy, without a single moment of free time. When we are together, either we are discussing martial arts or important affairs of state. I...I hate martial arts."

Duan Yu slapped his thigh and declared, "Not bad, not bad! I hate martial arts as well. My uncle and my father both told me to learn martial arts, but I refused to learn no matter what, and chose to sneak away from home instead."

The maiden let out a long sigh. "In order to be able to often meet with him, despite hating martial arts, I forced myself to not only read boxing treatises and sabre manuals, but also to memorize them, so that if there was something he did not understand, I could explain it to him. But I myself do not learn them. It isn't very refined for girls to brandish sabres and wave cudgels about..." Duan Yu agreed from the bottom of his heart. "Right, right! How could a girl like you, a peerless beauty, get into physical battles with others? That'd really be totally inappropriate. Ack!..." He suddenly realized that these words he said were offensive to his own mother. The maiden didn't really pay much attention to what he said and continued, "All of the political leaders of every dynasty have always been engaged in power struggles. Today, I try to kill you; tomorrow, you try to kill me. I really don't want to know about those things. But he loves talking about those matters, so I have no choice but to read those types of books to be able to tell him about these things."

Duan Yu asked curiously, "Why is it that you have to read books and then explain them to him? Can't he read them himself?" The maiden glanced at him. "What, you think he's an idiot? That he doesn't know how to read?" Duan Yu hastily said, "No, no! He's the best person in the whole wide world, alright?" Although Duan Yu said these words, in his heart he felt sour.

The maiden smiled beautifully. "He's my maternal cousin. Aside from my aunt, my uncle, and him, very few people come to visit this place. But after my uncle passed away, my mother got into a spat with my aunt. Now, my mother doesn't even allow my cousin to come visit. I honestly don't know if he's the best person in the whole world. I am not able to get to know the good people or the bad people of the world." Duan Yu said, "Why not ask your daddy?"

The maiden said, "My father died a long time ago. He passed away even before I was born. I...I've never seen his

face." As she spoke, her eyes reddened as though tears once more wanted to emerge.

Duan Yu said, "Right, so your aunt would be your father's older sister, and your uncle is your aunt's husband, so he... he...he is your aunt's son." The maiden laughed out loud. "You are so muddle-headed. I'm my mother's daughter, and he is my cousin."

Seeing that he was able to coax a laugh from her, Duan Yu was very happy. He said, "Oh, I know! It must be that your cousin is too busy to read books, so you have to read them for him." The maiden said, "You could put it like that, but there's another reason as well. Let me ask you, why is it that the monks of Shaolin are falsely accusing my cousin of having killed one of their people?"

Duan Yu saw that a single tear still quivered at the end of her long eyelashes. He thought to himself, "The ancients wrote, 'Pear flowers blossom when the spring brings rain.' This is a metaphor for a beautiful woman crying. But although pear flowers are all very beautiful, pear trees themselves are too fat and heavy. In addition, after a rainstorm, every pear flower would have 'tears' on them. That's an excessive amount of sadness. Miss Wang is like a camellia flower covered with faint dew; only this can be considered truly beautiful beauty."

The maiden waited for a while, but Duan Yu still did not reply. She stretched her hand out and gently tapped the back of his hand. "What's wrong with you?" Duan Yu's entire body trembled, and he shot to his feet, calling out, "Aiyo!" The maiden was frightened for a moment, and asked, "What's wrong?" His entire face burning red, Duan Yu replied, "When you tapped your fingers on the back of my hand, it felt as though my acupoints were being sealed."

The maiden opened her eyes wide, not knowing that he was joking. She said, "There's no acupoints on this side of the hand. The 'Ye Men' [Liquid Gate], 'Zhong Zhu' [Central Islet], and the 'Yang Chi' [Yang Moat] acupoints are all on the

palm of the hand. The 'Qian Huo' [First Opening] and the 'Yang Lao' [Providing For the Elderly] acupoints are on the wrist. All of them are very far away." As she spoke, she used the back of her own hand to demonstrate.

As Duan Yu watched as she pointed towards the tender, delicate, snowy-white back of her hand, he felt his throat become dry. His head felt dizzy and he asked, "Mi...Miss, what is your name?"

The maiden smiled. "You are a really weird fellow, you know that? Fine, I guess there's no harm in telling you. Even if I don't tell you, those two little rascals, Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, will tell you." Stretching a finger out, she drew three characters on the back of her own hand: "Wang Yuyan." [Yuyan means 'Beautiful Speech' or 'Beautiful Language']

Duan Yu called out, "Wonderful, wonderful! Beautiful smiles and speech, and a kind, amiable personality." He thought to himself, "Let's make things clear from the start. If she's like her mother, being perfectly fine one moment then suddenly angry the next and having me go plant flowers, then the name is insuitable for her."

Wang Yuyan smiled. "People always have nice names. All of those vile, wicked, evil people in history had beautiful names as well. Cao Cao did not necessarily display any upright conduct [De Cao means Upright Conduct], and Zhu Quanzhong was totally disloyal [Quanzhong means Totally Loyal]. Your name is Duan Yu. Is your name, Yu, such a good name? I'm afraid you're a little 'buying fame...' [Gu Ming]" Duan Yu interjected, "...and fishing for praise' [Diao Yu!]" The two of them laughed loudly together. [The phrase, 'Gu Ming Diao Yu', means fishing for compliments and praise.]

Wang Yuyan's beautiful face had always seemed to carry a hint of anxiety, but now, caught in the midst of joyful laughter, she became all the more charming and beautiful. Duan Yu thought to himself, "If I can spend the rest of my life

making her laugh and wreathing her face in smiles, there would be nothing more I would ask for from life.”

Unexpectedly, she was only happy for a brief period of time before once again that faint look of sorrow and worry settled across her face. She quietly said, “He...he’s always so serious. He never talks about such silly things with me. Alas! The nation of Yan, the nation of Yan...is it really that important?”

‘The nation of Yan, the nation of Yan’; these words, upon entering Duan Yu’s ears, suddenly interlinked with many previously separate terms and phrases. The ‘Murong lineage’, the ‘Basin of Swallows,’ the ‘Canhe Manor’, the ‘nation of Yan’...Duan Yu suddenly blurted out, “Is this Young Master Murong the descendant of Murong clan of the Xianbei people, who carved out the ‘Yan’ empire during the time when the five Hu minority nationalities spread chaos in China? He is of the Hu minority, and is not a Chinese person?”

Wang Yuyan nodded. “Right. He is the descendant of the former princes of the Murong family which ruled the nation of Yan. But that was centuries ago. There’s no need to constantly bear in mind ancient history and the affairs of your ancestors. He wants to be a Hu person, not a Chinese person. He doesn’t want to learn Chinese characters or read Chinese books. But I don’t see what’s so bad about Chinese books. Once, I said to him, ‘Cousin, if you say that Chinese books are bad, what books do the Xianbei people have? I want to take a look.’ But he immediately flew into a rage because there’s no such thing as Xianbei-language books to begin with.”

She slightly raised her head, staring at the lazy, distant clouds in the sky. In her soft voice, she said, “He...he is ten years older than me. He’s always just thought of me as a younger sister. He thinks that I don’t know anything aside from reading books and memorizing martial arts techniques. He has never realized that I read books for his sake,

memorize martial arts for his sake. If it weren't for him, I'd rather raise a few chicks to play with, or play the zither, or practice calligraphy."

In a quivering voice, Duan Yu said, "He truly doesn't know that you...that you are this good to him?"

Wang Yuyan replied, "Of course he knows that I am good to him. He's always treated me very well as well. But...but it's as though we are actual brothers and sisters. Aside from serious matters, he never discusses anything with me. He never tells me what he is thinking, nor does he ever ask me if I have anything on my mind." Her jade-like cheeks blushed a faint red, and a bashful look appeared in her eyes and on her face.

At first, Duan Yu wanted to tease her and ask her, "What sort of things do you have on your mind?" But seeing the tender, bashful look on her beautiful face, he didn't dare run the risk of offending this beautiful lady. He said, "You don't need to always discuss history and martial arts with him. Aren't there a lot of evening songs and love poems in the books you read?" As soon as he said this, he felt regretful. "Just let her continue to stare at him with soft eyes and tender glances, but be unable to communicate with him. Isn't that a good thing? Why should I teach her techniques to communicate with him? I really am a total idiot."

Wang Yuyan became all the more bashful. She hurriedly said, "How...how could I do that? I am a prim and proper maiden. How could I bring up these...these poems and songs, and have my cousin look down upon me?"

Duan Yu let out a long breath, then said, "Absolutely, you are absolutely right." In his heart, he cursed at himself, "Duan Yu, you bastard, you really aren't an upright and honest gentleman."

Wang Yuyan had never revealed these thoughts of hers to anyone else. She kept them in her heart, examining and re-examining them many times over by herself. Today, by chance, she ran into a fellow like Duan Yu, who was naturally

easygoing and unrestrained in temperament. For some reason, she felt that he was very trustworthy and divulged to him all of the tender and soft feelings she had towards Murong Fu. Actually, the likes of Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, and even Xiaocha, Xiaoming, and Youcao all naturally knew that she was secretly in love with her cousin. It was just that none of them spoke aloud regarding it. After talking for so long, the gloomy feeling in her heart dissipated slightly. She said, "I digressed a lot in our conversation, and we didn't get to the main topic. Why, exactly, is Shaolin making things difficult for my cousin?"

Knowing that he was unable to dodge the question any longer, Duan Yu said, "The abbot of Shaolin is known as Master Xuanci. He has a junior martial-brother named Xuanbei. Master Xuanbei is most proficient at using the 'Veda Sceptre' style." Wang Yuyan nodded. "That is the forty-eighth fighting style amongst Shaolin's Seventy Two Ultimate Techniques. Within the style, there are only a total of nineteen individual stances, but all of them are very fearsome and overpowering when executed."

Duan Yu continued, "When Master Xuanbei came to Dali, he was somehow killed by someone within the Shenjie monastery in Dali's Luliang prefecture. Moreover, the technique which the killer used against him was the technique which Master Xuanbei himself was famous for; the 'Veda Sceptre' technique. They said that only Gusu's Murong family harms others in such a manner, which they called 'using the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.'" Wang Yuyan nodded. "That's not unreasonable."

Duan Yu said, "Aside from Shaolin, there are others who also are seeking revenge upon the Murong lineage." Wang Yuyan said, "Who else?" Duan Yu said, "Within the Hidden Ox sect, there was a man named Ke Baisui who specialized in a technique known as the 'Thousand Ruptures on the Soul of Heaven'." Wang Yuyan said, "Oh! That is the fourth variation of the ninth stance of the Hidden Ox sect's 'Ever-

Victorious Soft Whip' technique. Although the technique is extremely strange, it can't really be considered a top-tier martial arts technique; all that can be said in its favor is that the force it unleashes is extremely hard and fierce." Duan Yu said, "This person was killed by the 'Thousand Ruptures on the Soul of Heaven' technique. His martial-brother and his apprentice are naturally seeking revenge upon the Murong family."

Wang Yuyan mumbled to herself, "It's possible that my cousin killed Ke Baisui, but he definitely did not kill Xuanbei. My cousin doesn't know the 'Veda Sceptre' technique. It is extremely difficult to learn. But if you ever meet my cousin, don't tell him that he doesn't know this technique, and definitely don't tell him that I told you so. Otherwise, he'll fly into a rage."

Just as they spoke to this point, the sound of two pairs of feet rushing towards them could be heard. It was Xiaoming and Youcao.

There was look of dread on Youcao's face. Totally flustered, she said, "Miss, bad...bad news! The madame ordered that Ah Zhu and Ah Bi..." Her voice choked, and for the moment she couldn't say anything. Xiaoming stepped in, "That their right hands be chopped off, to punish them for their offense of arrogantly barging into the Highland Manor of the Camellias. She also said that if she ever sees them again, she'll immediately have their heads chopped off. What...what are we to do?"

Duan Yu hurriedly said, "Miss Wang, quick, you've got to think of a way to rescue them!"

Wang Yuyan was very anxious as well. Knitting her eyebrows, she said, "Ah Zhu and Ah Bi are my cousin's trusted servants. If I allow them to be crippled, how can I face my cousin? Youcao, where are they?" Youcao, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi were extremely good friends. Hearing that Wang Yuyan seemed inclined towards helping them, she felt a ray of hope. She hurriedly said, "The madame ordered that the

two of them be taken to the 'Flower Fertilizer Shed'. I begged Granny Yan to delay the execution of the sentence by an hour. If you go beg the madame immediately, there's still a chance." Wang Yuyan thought to herself, "Most likely, begging my mother to show mercy is useless. But except for this, there are no other options." She immediately nodded, then left with Youcao and Xiaoming.

Watching her slim and graceful back disappear, Duan Yu wanted to run after her and say a few more words to her. But after taking a single step, he felt as though he had no words to say. As he stood there, stupefied, he began to reminisce about the conversation he just had with her. He couldn't help but go crazy over it.

Wang Yuyan walked swiftly to the main rooms. Seeing her mother reclining on a bed, lost in a trance while staring at a camellia painting that was hanging on the wall, she called out, "Mother!"

Madame Wang slowly turned her head. A grim expression was on her face. "What do you want to talk to me about? If it has to do with the Murong family, I don't want to hear it." Wang Yuyan said, "Mother, Ah Zhu and Ah Bi didn't come here on purpose this time. Can't you let them off the hook, just this once?" Madame Wang said, "How do you know they didn't come here on purpose? Are you afraid that if I chop their hands off, your cousin will never speak to you ever again?" Tears began to gather in Wang Yuyan's eyes. "My cousin is your nephew. Why...why must you hate him so much? Even if my aunt offended you, you don't need to resent my cousin." She had summoned up all her courage to say these words, but as soon as she did, her heart began thumping wildly in her chest. Even she herself was shocked at how daring she had been in directly contradicting her mother.

Frozen lightning was in Madame Wang's eyes. She swept her gaze across her daughter's face a few times, but did not

immediately respond. Following this, she closed her eyes. Wang Yuyan didn't dare to so much as take a loud breath, unsure as to just what exactly her mother was planning.

After a long time, Madame Wang opened her eyes. She said, "How do you know that your aunt offended me? How did she offend me?" Hearing how icy her mother's tone was, Wang Yuyan was so frightened that she couldn't even speak. Madame Wang said, "Go ahead and tell me. You are growing older, and no longer need to obey me anyhow." Both angry and anxious, Wang Yuyan began to cry. "Mother, for you...for you to hate her family so much, she must have offended you somehow. But you never told me how she offended you. Now that she's passed away, you...you don't need to cling to your hatred of her." Madame Wang snapped at her, "Have you heard anyone talk about this?" Wang Yuyan shook her head. "You never allow me to leave, nor do you allow outsiders to come. Who would talk to me about this?"

Madame Wang let out a quiet sigh. Her tense, taut face immediately loosened, and the tone of her voice became gentle as well. She said, "I do this for your own good. There are too many bad people in the outside world, each of whom kills more than the next. It's best for a young lady like you to not meet with bad people." As she said this, she suddenly thought of something and added, "The new gardener who is surnamed Duan is very glib and very sly. He's not a good person. If he says so much as a single sentence to you, immediately order the servant girls to kill him. Don't allow him to say a second sentence. Understood?" Wang Yuyan thought to herself, "What's this about one sentence or two sentences? We've probably talked for more than one hundred or two hundred sentences!"

Madame Wang said, "What is it? Look at how soft-hearted and gentle you are; the gods only know how much suffering you will have to endure in your life because of it." She clapped twice and Xiaoming entered. Madame Wang said, "Pass the word down. If anyone talks to the gardener

surnamed Duan, both of their tongues will be cut out." Xiaoming looked stupefied. Madame Wang's attitude seemed to be that of one who was ordering a chicken or a dog to be slaughtered. She replied, "Yes!" She hurriedly retreated. Madame Wang waved a hand towards her daughter. "You leave as well!"

Wang Yuyan replied, "Yes." As she passed through the doorway, she turned her head and said, "Mother, please show mercy to Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, and just order them to never come here again, under any circumstances." Madame Wang said coldly, "How often do I go back on my word? No matter what you say, I won't change my mind."

Madame Wang clenched her teeth. In a low voice, she said, "I know why you hate auntie and why you dislike my cousin." With a few quiet steps, she hurriedly exited.

Madame Wang said, "Get back!" These words were particularly loud or clear, but were filled with an awe-inspiring dignity. Wang Yuyan returned to the room, head lowered and silent. Madame Wang stared at the quivering lines of blue smoke rising from the incense-burners in the room. In a low voice, she said, "Yan'er, what do you know? No need to lie to me. It's best if you just say everything." Wang Yuyan bit her lower lip. "Auntie blamed you for killing people indiscriminately, to the point where you offended the local government authorities as well as created many vendettas with people of the martial world."

Madame Wang said, "Correct. These are the affairs of the Wang family. What did they have to do with her Murong family? She was nothing more than your father's elder sister. What authority did she have to try and govern me? Hmph, over the past few hundred years, the only thing the Murong family has done is dream about 'restoring the Yan dynasty'. All they can think about is uniting the heroes of the world under their banner. They fawn on people and try to make alliances. Heh heh, and now, they've even offended both the Beggars' Clan and Shaolin."

Wang Yuyan said, "Mother, my cousin definitely did not kill Master Xuanbei of Shaolin. He doesn't know how to use..." But just as she was about to say 'the Veda Sceptre technique', she hurriedly paused. As soon as her mother found out where she had heard those words from, it would be almost impossible for Duan Yu to escape death. Instead, she said, "...I'm afraid his martial arts level isn't good enough."

Madame Wang said, "True. Right now, he went to pay a visit to Shaolin. Those blabbermouth servant girls naturally have already told you this. 'Nothorn Qiao Feng, Southern Murong.' This saying is really famous and resounding. But can one Murong Fu, plus a Deng Baichun, really get any good results from this trip to Shaolin by themselves? He really doesn't know his own limits!" Wang Yuyan took a few steps forward. In a supplicating voice, she said, "Mother, can you please think of a way to rescue him? Can you send some people to go give him a helping hand? He...he's the last descendant of the Murong lineage. If something bad happens to him, the Murong family line will come to an end and their lineage be extinct." Madame Wang sneered, "Gusu's Murong family. Hmph. What does the Murong family has to do with me? Your auntie claimed that her Murong family's 'Water Pavilion of Bestowal and Repayment' is superior to our 'Jade Cavern Library'. Fine. Then let her precious son, Murong Fu, go to Shaolin and display his power and might." With a wave of her hand, she said, "Leave, leave!" Madame Wang said, "Mother, my cousin..." Madame Wang snapped, "You grow more and more impudent!"

Tears glistened in Wang Yuyan's eyes. Lowering her head, she left. Her mind was running wild and she had no idea what to do. As she walked to a porch in the west wing of the house, she heard someone say in a low voice, "Miss, what's wrong?" Wang Yuyan raised her head. It was Duan Yu. She hurriedly said, "You...don't talk to me!"

After Wang Yuyan had left earlier, Duan Yu had stood there in a daze for a while before slowly following her footstep in a befuddled way. He waited for her from a distance. After seeing her come out from Madame Wang's room, he couldn't prevent himself from following her. Seeing a grieved expression on Wang Yuyan's face, he knew that Madame Wang did not agree to her request. He said, "Even if the madame did not agree, we still need to think of something." Wang Yuyan replied, "If mother doesn't agree, what's the point of coming up with any ideas? She...she...she...my cousin is in a very dangerous situation, but she intends to fold her hands in her sleeves and ignore him." The more she spoke, the more miserable she felt, until she couldn't help but once more begin to shed tears.

Duan Yu replied, "Right, Young Master Murong really is in a lot of trouble..." He suddenly thought of something and asked, "You know so much about martial arts. Why don't you go yourself and help him out?" Wang Yuyan opened her dark, liquid eyes, and stared at him as though this was the most bizarre idea in the entire world. After a long time, she said, "I...I understand martial arts, but don't practice them. Besides, how could I go? Mother definitely wouldn't allow it." Duan Yu smiled. "Your mother naturally won't let you go, but aren't you able to sneak out by yourself? I once left home by myself alone. Afterwards, when I came back home, my mother and father didn't scold me too harshly."

After hearing these words, Wang Yuyan suddenly saw the light. Her eyes brightened, and she thought to herself, "Right! If I sneak out to go help my cousin, even if mother severely punishes me when I return, it's no big deal. Even if she wants to kill me, I'll have already helped my cousin." When she thought about having the chance to undergo trials and tribulations on behalf of her cousin, her heart was filled with both misery and sweetness. Then she thought, "This person said he secretly ran away before. Hm, right, why didn't I ever think of anything like this?" Duan Yu,

sneaking glances at her, saw that she seemed to be half-convinced. He immediately exerted all his effort to convince her. He said, "You always stay here, within the Highland Manor of the Camellias. Don't you want to check out the dazzling outside world and see its myriad temptations?"

Wang Yuyan shook her head. "What does it have worth checking? I'm just worried about my cousin. But I've never practiced martial arts. If he really meets up with any problems, I won't be able to help." Duan Yu replied, "Why wouldn't you be of help? You'd be of tremendous help! When your cousin is fighting others, you can give watch and give him a few words of advice from the sidelines. This is known as 'the bystander sees most clearly'. When someone else was playing a game of chess and about to lose, I gave him some advice from the sidelines and he immediately managed a complete comeback. This just happened very recently." Wang Yuyan felt he made a lot of sense, but wasn't able to summon up enough courage. She hesitantly said, "I've never been away from home. I don't even know if Shaolin is to the east or to the west."

Duan Yu immediately jumped at the opportunity. "I'll accompany you. If any problems arise on the road, just let me deal with them." He naturally didn't bring up the point that his own experience in the martial world was brilliantly shallow.

Wang Yuyan furrowed her eyebrows. Inclining her head to one side, she mumbled to herself indecisively. Duan Yu asked, "What's happening with Ah Zhu and Ah Bi?" Wang Yuyan said, "Mother won't let them off." Duan Yu said, "In for a penny, in for a pound! [Lit. 'Either don't act at all, or don't stop once you do!'] If Ah Zhu and Ah Bi have their right hands chopped off, your cousin will definitely blame you. Why don't we go rescue them, then the two of us will immediately set off." Wang Yuyan stuck out her tongue. "How can my mother possibly forgive such an enormous outrage? You really have way too much courage!"

Duan Yu knew very well that right now nothing could move her mind aside from her cousin. He immediately used the tactic of retreating to seize an advantage. He said, "If that's the case, then let's go immediately and just let your mother chop off Ah Zhu and Ah Bi's hands. In the future, when your cousin asks you about it, you can just deny knowing about it. I definitely won't divulge the secret."

Wang Yuyan hurriedly said, "How can I do that? Isn't that lying to him?" She felt very hesitant. "Alas! Ah Zhu and Ah Bi are his two trusted servants. If anything bad were to happen to them, the grudge between the Murong family and my Wang family will only grow all the more deep." Stamping her left foot, she said, "You, come with me."

Hearing the four words 'You, come with me', Duan Yu was so happy he could have died at that moment with no complaints. In his entire life, he'd never heard four more beautiful words. Seeing that she was walking towards the northwest, he followed her from behind.

In a short amount of time, they arrived outside of a large stone room. Wang Yuyan said, "Granny Yan, please come out. I want to talk to you."

A strange laughter emanated from the stone room. A shriveled, dry voice said, "My dear Young Miss, have you come to see how granny makes flower fertilizer?"

Earlier, Duan Yu had heard Youcao and Xiaoming say that Ah Zhu and Ah Bi had been taken to the 'Flower Fertilizer Shed'. Then, he hadn't really paid it too much mind. Now, upon hearing this extremely sinister voice say the words, 'flower fertilizer', his heart froze. "What is the 'Flower Fertilizer Shed'? Is it where fertilizer for the flowers is kept? Damn, right, Madame Wang is incomparably ruthless. She buries people alive and uses them as fertilizer for her flowers. If we came too late, Ah Zhu and Ah Bi's right hands will have already been chopped off and turned into fertilizer. What will we do then?" His heart thumped frantically, and all the blood disappeared from his face.

Wang Yuyan said, "Granny Yan, my mother has something to discuss with you. Please come out." The woman in the stone room said, "I'm busy. What pressing business does the madame have, that she sends you to personally come tell me?" Wang Yuyan said, "My mother said...hey, are they here yet?"

As she spoke, she entered the stone room. She saw that Ah Zhu and Ah Bi were bound against two iron pillars. Something was jammed into their mouths, preventing them from saying anything despite their eyes being filled with tears. Duan Yu glanced inside as well. Seeing that Ah Zhu and Ah Bi were not yet harmed, he felt half-relieved. After glancing around the rest of the shed, his heart, which had just barely began to calm down, began to beat wildly again. An old lady with a crooked back who was holding a long, bright, and gleaming sabre in her hands stood next to them. By their side was a boiling cauldron of water that was emitting steady streams of water vapour.

Wang Yuyan said, "Granny Yan, mother orders that they be released for now. There's something important she wants to question them about first."

Granny Yan turned around. Duan Yu saw that she had an extremely ugly face, filled with malice. She nodded. "Fine. After she's done asking questions, escort them back and have their hands chopped off then." She muttered to herself, "The thing which I, Granny Yan, hate seeing the most is pretty girls. These two girls must have a hand chopped off. Only then will they really be good looking. I'll go talk to the madame; we should chop off both their hands. We've been running a bit low on fertilizer." Duan Yu was furious. He thought to himself that this old woman was filled with evil and maliciousness. Who knows how many people she had already killed? If it weren't for the fact that he didn't have the strength to truss up a chicken, he would have given her a few strong blows to her mouth and knock two or three of her teeth out before freeing Ah Zhu and Ah Bi.

Although Granny Yan was getting on in years, her ears remained sharp. She immediately heard the sound of Duan Yu's harsh breathing and asked, "Who is outside?" Sticking her head outside, she saw Duan Yu. She fiercely asked, "Who are you?" Duan Yu laughed, "I'm the person who the madame ordered to be her gardener. Granny Yan, might I ask if you have any fresh fertilizer for me?" Granny Yan replied, "Wait a short while. We'll have some soon." Turning her head, she said, "Miss, your cousin likes these two girls very much, doesn't he?"

Wang Yuyan said, "Yes. It's best for you not to hurt them." Granny Yan nodded. "Miss, isn't it true that the madame ordered that these two girls each have their right hands be chopped off and be expelled from the manor, and also told them that if she ever sees them again, she'll chop their heads off?" Wang Yuyan said, "Yes." As soon as she said this, she immediately knew something was wrong and hurriedly covered her mouth with her hands. Duan Yu secretly groaned bitterly. "Man. This young lady doesn't even know how to tell a lie."

Fortunately, it seemed as though Granny Yan was old and muddle-headed, not noticing this huge flaw in the story. She said, "Miss, this rope was tied very tightly. Come and help me untie it."

Wang Yuyan said, "Alright!" Walking to Ah Zhu side, she reached out to untie the rope fastening her wrists. Suddenly, with a clanking sound, an arcing steel hoop shot out of the metal pillar, trapping her slender waist....

Wang Yuyan let out a startled cry. Although there was a few inches of free space between her waist and the hoop, there was no way she would be able to escape.

Shocked, Duan Yu rushed into the room. He shouted, "What are you doing? Free the young lady!"

Granny Yan let out a series of strange, grumbling laughs. "Since the madame already said that if she ever saw these

girls again, she would chop off their heads, why would she summon them to ask them questions? The madame has so many servants; why does she need to send you to come personally? There are a lot of irregularities here. Miss, wait here a while. Let me personally go ask the Madame, and then we'll see."

Wang Yuyan angrily said, "What on earth do you think you're doing? Let me go immediately!" Granny Yan said, "Miss, I am totally devoted and loyal to the madame. I don't dare to do anything wrong. Old Mrs. Murong truly was far too impolite to the madame. She made a lot of malicious remarks and slandered the madame's stainless reputation. It isn't only the madame who was angry; even us servants hate her to the bone. That day, all the madame had to do was nod and we would have dug a tomb for her, then dragged her corpse to the 'Flower Fertilizer Shed' and turned her into ordinary fertilizer. Miss, let me tell you this. There isn't a single good person in the Murong family. There's no way the madame would have consented to spare these two girls. But since you gave me these orders, I am going to go to the madame and figure everything out. If things really are the way you say they are, I'll come back and immediately kneel before you and apologize. You can just go ahead and use wooden rods to beat me in accordance with our household rules." Wang Yuyan was very worried. She said, "Hey, hey, don't go ask the madame! My mother will be angry!"

Granny Yan harbored no more doubt in her heart, knowing that the young lady was certainly making mischief behind her mother's back. In order to protect her cousin's servants, she had transmitted false orders. She decided to seize the opportunity to win some merit. She said, "Excellent, excellent! Miss, wait here a bit. This old granny will be right back." Wang Yuyan cried out, "Don't leave! Free me first!" Granny Yan ignored her, quickly leaving the stone room.

Seeing the situation had reached a critical point, Duan Yu stretched out both his hands, blocking her way. Laughing, he said, "Wouldn't it be better if you release her, then go to speak with the madame? You are a servant, after all. In the long run, it does you no good to offend the young miss."

Narrowing her eyes, Granny Yan inclined her head to one side before saying, "You are behaving very inappropriately, you little punk." With a flip of her hand, she seized Duan Yu by the wrist, then dragged him next to the metal pillar as well. She activated the pillar, and with a clanking sound, it shot out another metal hoop which settled around Duan Yu's waist as well. Panic-stricken, Duan Yu stretched his hand out and grabbed her by the wrists, refusing to let go no matter what.

As soon as she was seized by him, Granny Yan felt as though her internal energy was continuously flowing out of her in a steady stream. She felt unspeakably uncomfortable, and angrily shouted, "Let go!" But as exerted her energy to shout loudly, her internal energy began to flow out of her more quickly. She struggled ferociously, but was unable to free herself from Duan Yu's grip. Shocked, she said, "Little bastard...what are you doing? Let go of me now!"

Duan Yu was directly facing her hideous face, with only a few inches separating them. With his back forced against the metal pillar, there was no way for him to lean his head backwards. Seeing that her filthy yellow teeth looked as though they were about to bite his throat out, he was both terrified and nauseated. But he knew that at this critical moment, if he released her, not only would Wang Yuyan receive a heavy punishment, but he himself along with Ah Zhu and Ah Bi would be unable to keep their lives. All he could do was shut his eyes and not look at her.

Granny Yan said, "You...are you going to let go or not?" Her voice was already weak. Originally, Duan Yu fully absorbed the internal energy of the seven disciples of Mt. Wuliang's Sword sect, then drained a portion of the internal

energy of many high-calibre martial artists. With his internal energy having grown more powerful, the suctioning power of the Divine Art of the Northern Darkness grew greater as well. At this point, draining Granny Yan's internal energy took but a short amount of time. Although Granny Yan appeared to be very ferocious, her actual internal energy reserves was limited. In less than the time it would take to drink a cup of tea, she was totally worn out and looked exhausted. All she could do was gasp out, "Let...go of me, let...let...let go."

Duan Yu replied, "First, activate the mechanism to release me." Granny Yan said, "Yes, yes!" Squatting down, she stretched out her right hand to activate a mechanism that was hidden underneath the nearby table. With a cracking sound, the metal hoop which had encircled Duan Yu's waist retracted. Pointing at Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi, Duan Yu ordered that they be immediately released as well.

Granny Yan tugged at the mechanism which controlled Wang Yuyan's metal hoop, but even after some time passed, it refused to move. Duan Yu angrily said, "Why aren't you releasing the young miss immediately?" Granny Yan frowned, "I...I don't have any energy left in me at all."

Stretching his own hand out, Duan Yu felt for the mechanism underneath the table. Finding it, he tugged on it, and with a clanking sound, the metal hoop surrounding Wang Yuyan slowly retracted into the pillar. Duan Yu was elated, but still did not yet dare to release Granny Yan from his hold. Picking up the long sabre which had fallen to the floor, he sawed through the ropes which bound Ah Bi.

After being released, Ah Bi took the sabre away from him and cut away the ropes binding Ah Zhu. They were both startled and elated, and removed the rough walnuts from their mouths. For the moment, they remained speechless.

Wang Yuyan glanced at Duan Yu a few times, a look of surprise on her face, mixed with some disdain. "How is it that you know the Great Art of Energy Dissipation? Why would you learn such a filthy technique?"

Duan Yu shook his head. "This isn't the Great Art of Energy Dissipation." He decided that not only was there no time to explain everything clearly, even if he did she might not believe him. It would be best just to make something up. He said, "This is a technique of Dali's Duan family, which is known as the 'Six Suns Melting the Snow' technique. It's derived from a combination of the 'Solitary Solar Finger' and the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. It is orthodox where the Great Art of Energy Dissipation is heretical, and benevolent where the latter is vile. The two can't be mentioned in the same sentence."

Wang Yuyan immediately believed him. Smiling sweetly, she said, "Please forgive me for my ignorance. I've long heard of Dali's 'Solitary Solar Finger' and the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians', but this is the first time I have heard of your 'Six Suns Melting the Snow' technique. In the future, I'll have to ask you to explain it to me."

Duan Yu, hearing that this beautiful woman was willing to hear him explain the technique to her, was absolutely delighted. He hurriedly said, "Miss, all you have to do is ask, and I naturally will explain everything to you, without daring to hide anything."

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, in their wildest imaginings, wouldn't have dreamed that Duan Yu would be able to rush here to save them at this most critical of moments. Now, seeing him chat so amiably with the young Miss, they were even more astonished. Ah Zhu said, "Young Gentleman Duan, Miss, thank you both of rescuing us. We need to take this Granny Yan away with us, or else she might reveal what happened here."

Granny Yan was terrified. She thought to herself that if she were to be taken away by these girls, she would have less than a ten percent chance of survival at best. She cried out, "Miss, Miss! The old mistress of the Murong family accused the madame of having a secret lover, and said that you..." Ah Zhu pinched her cheeks with her left hand, then

shoved the walnuts which she had just spat out into Granny Yan's own mouth.

Duan Yu laughed. "Brilliant! This is the signature trait of the Murong family, well-known as 'using the opponent's technique, exercising it upon the opponent.'" Wang Yuyan said, "I'm coming with you. I'm going to see how he..." As she spoke, her entire face reddened, and she said in a low voice, "See how he...how he is doing." She had been irresolute previously, but the unexpected events which had just occurred helped her make her up mind. Ah Zhu happily said, "Miss, if you are willing to help out, that would be wonderful. In that case, there's no need to take Granny Yan with us." The two girls dragged Granny Yan next to the metal pillar, activated the mechanism, and trapped her with the steel hoop. The four of them quietly left the stone room, quickly moving towards the lakeside.

Fortunately, they didn't encounter any servants on their way. The four of them got onto the boat which Ah Zhu and Ah Bi had rowed over here and immediately began to row towards the middle of the lake. Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, and Duan Yu all rowed simultaneously. It wasn't until they could no longer see so much as the slightest shadow of the Highland Manor of the Camellias that they slightly relaxed. But, afraid that Madame Wang might pursue them in her fast ship, they did not stop rowing.

After they rowed for a long time, the sun began to set and the misty water vapour began to thicken and settle across the face of the lake. Ah Zhu said, "Miss, we're relatively close to the place where we servants live. Tonight, we'll have to ask that you settle for the inconvenience of temporarily staying here for a night. Then, we'll discuss what's the best way for finding the young master. Is that alright?" Wang Yuyan said, "Alright, we'll do things your way." The farther they were from the Highland Manor of the Camellias, the more taciturn she grew.

Duan Yu watched her dress be gently fluttered by the clean lake wind. It was dusk, and there was a slight chill in the air. Suddenly, a dreary, desolate feeling entered his heart. The earlier joyfulness of their escape gradually faded away.

After they rowed for another long period of time, it was so dark that he could not see anybody's eyes or nose clearly. Towards the eastern horizon, bright lights and lit lamps could be seen. Ah Bi said, "That place over there with the bright lights is Sister Ah Zhu's 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds'." They began to row the boat in that direction. Duan Yu suddenly thought to himself, "In this lifetime, I'm afraid that I will never experience the emotions of tonight a second time. Wouldn't it be wonderful if this small boat would never be able to reach those lights?" Suddenly, a bright light appeared in the sky. A bright comet with a long tail streaked across the heavens.

Wang Yuyan whispered a few soft words which Duan Yu couldn't quite make out. In the middle of the darkness, he could only hear the sound of her sigh. Ah Bi said in a soft voice, "Miss, don't worry. All his life, the young master has turned bad luck into good fortune. He's never met with any real calamity." Wang Yuyan said, "Shaolin has been famous for hundreds of years. This isn't a trivial matter at all. I can only hope that the eminent monks within the monastery will listen to reason and are willing to allow my cousin to explain. I'm just afraid...afraid that my cousin has a bad temper, and begins to get into a verbal battle with the monks of Shaolin, alas..." She paused for a moment, then quietly said, "Every time a meteor flashes across the sky, I'm never able to complete my wish."

There is a traditional belief in the Jiangnan that whenever a shooting star streaks across the sky, if a person manages to make a wish before the shooting star disappears, anything they ask for, no matter how difficult it is to accomplish, will come to pass in a satisfactory manner. But

shooting stars always disappear very quickly. Oftentimes before the wish-maker has finished saying but a few words, the shooting star will have already disappeared. Over the course of centuries, it is unknown as to how many young men and women have placed their hopes and dreams on shooting stars, and how many have been disappointed. Although Wang Yuyan had a very deep understanding of martial arts, she still possessed the sentiments and feelings of a young person. In this, there was very little difference between her and the young daughters of farmers and peasants who lived on the lake.

Upon hearing her words, Duan Yu felt a fresh stab of pain in his heart. He clearly knew that the wish she wanted to make had to do with Young Master Murong, and that she was certainly wishing for him to be safe and unharmed, and that he would accomplish all his goals. Staring at his feet, he thought to himself, "In the whole wide world, what girl would be like Wang Yuyan and secretly make wishes on my behalf? Sister Wan once deeply loved me, but now that she knows I am her Elder Brother, she surely views me in a different light. I wonder where she is now? Has she met up with a husband-and-lord who pleases her? And what of Zhong Ling? Does she know that I am her Elder Brother by blood? Even if she doesn't know, when she thinks of me, at most her heart will be moved at that moment. Shortly afterwards, she'll have thrust the thought from her mind. She definitely wouldn't be like how Wang Yuyan is right now, thinking of her beloved with an aching longing that penetrates her mind and which has settled into her very bones."

Chapter 13: Giving Pointers to Extraordinary Men at the Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

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The boat drew closer and closer to the shore. Suddenly, Ah Zhu said in a low voice, “Ah Bi, look. This doesn’t seem right.” Ah Bi nodded. “Right. Why are so many lanterns lit?” She let out two quiet laughs, then said, “Sister Ah Zhu, is your home celebrating the lantern festival? There’s so many bright lanterns and lamps. Maybe it’s a birthday party for you?” Ah Zhu remained silent, eyes transfixed on those bright lights.

From far away, Duan Yu could see eight or nine buildings on the islet. Two of those buildings were two-storeyed buildings. There was light emanating from the windows of every building. He thought to himself, “As Ah Zhu’s home is known as the ‘Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds’, I imagine it should be much similar to Ah Bi’s ‘Pavilion of Zither Melodies’. The reason there are so many bright lights here is no doubt because Sister Ah Zhu likes to keep things noisy and lively.

When the boat came within one li of the shore, Ah Zhu halted her oar and said, “Miss Wang, enemies have come to my home.” Wang Yuyan was startled. “What? Enemies have come? How do you know? Who are they?” Ah Zhu replied, “I don’t know who they are, exactly. But take a whiff. The smell of alcohol reeks to high heaven. It must be that wicked visitors are causing trouble here.” Wang Yuyan and Ah Bi both sniffed hard, but neither could notice any scent. Duan Yu, in turn was attenuated to the scent of maidens, but otherwise was normal and had no special smelling abilities.

Ah Zhu's nose was extremely sensitive. She said, "Oh no, oh no! They've destroyed my jasmine nectar and my rose nectar. Ack! They've even ruined my winter plum nectar..." At this point, it seemed as though she was about to cry.

Duan Yu was astonished. "Are your eyes so keen that you've seen them?" Sobbing, Ah Zhu choked out, "No. I smelled them. It took me a lot of care and effort to distil those nectars. These evil visitors must have taken them for alcohol and drank them!" Ah Bi said, "Sister Ah Zhu, what should we do? Should we avoid them, or should we go and fight?" Ah Zhu said, "I don't know if the opponent's are very powerful..." Duan Yu said, "Right. If the enemies are very powerful, the best choice would be for us to avoid them. If they are just ordinary characters, it would be best for us to go teach them a lesson and prevent Sister Ah Zhu's precious treasures from being ruined even more." Ah Zhu was feeling very unhappy. Now, listening to Duan Yu's pointless speech, she replied, "Avoid the strong, bully the weak. Who doesn't understand this logic? But how do you know if the opponent is very powerful, or just ordinary?" Duan Yu opened his mouth to respond, but had no idea what to say.

Ah Zhu said, "Let's go take a closer look and find out. However, all of us need to change our clothes and dress up as aged fisherman and old ladies." Pointing to the east, she said, "An old fisherman and his wife live there. They both know me. Let's go borrow their clothes." Clapping his hands, Duan Yu laughed, "Wonderful, wonderful!" With a tug of the oar, Ah Zhu sent the boat eastward. When she thought about putting on new disguises, her spirit was instantly invigorated, and she no longer was too distraught about enemies having come to her home.

Ah Zhu first disguised herself, Wang Yuyan, and Ah Bi. She disguised herself as an old fishwife and turned Wang Yuyan and Ah Bi into middle-aged fishwives. Lastly, she began to work on Duan Yu, changing him into a forty-year old fisherman. Ah Zhu's disguising skills were truly

matchless and incomparably wondrous. She obtained some flour and some mud, then spread a little here and pasted a little there. In the blink of an eye, everyone's appearances totally changed. Next, she borrowed a fishing boat, a fishing net, a fishing pole, some living fish, and the like, before paddling the boat towards the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds'.

Although Duan Yu, Wang Yuyan, and Ah Bi's appearances had been changed, their voices remained the same. It was the weak point in their disguise. Even if they had years, they wouldn't be able to master Ah Zhu's skills in disguise. Wang Yuyan laughed, "Ah Zhu, if anything happens, you'll have to take the lead in dealing with it. We'll just have to pretend to be mute." Ah Zhu laughed, "Right. I promise to keep you from being exposed."

The fishing boat slowly glided towards the back of the pavilion. Duan Yu saw that weeping willows grew all around the pavilion, but bursts of loud, uncouth yelling sounds continuously emanated from within the building. Such wild shouts and screams were totally at odds with the quiet, ingenious, and tasteful layout of the building and the surrounding plants.

Ah Zhu let out another sigh. She was totally unhappy. Ah Bi whispered into her ear, "Sister Ah Zhu, after we chase the enemies away, I'll come help you fix the place up." Ah Zhu squeezed her hand to show her thanks.

The four of them entered the kitchen from the rear. The chef, old Gu, was so busy that his head was covered with sweat. He was unceasingly spitting his saliva into the boiling cauldron, then rubbing his dirty hands together and causing the mud and the dirt on his hands to fall into the cauldron as well. Ah Zhu was half-amused, half-angry. She called out, "Old Gu! What are you doing?" Old Gu was so startled, he jumped. Frightened, he said, "You...you..." Ah Zhu laughed, "I am Miss Ah Zhu." Old Gu was overjoyed. "Miss Ah Zhu, a lot of bad men came. They forced me to cook dishes and

broil vegetables for them. Watch!" As he spoke, he blew his nose and dripped his snot into the middle of the vegetables, then began to laugh. Ah Zhu wrinkled her forehead. "You cook such nasty dishes!" Old Gu hurriedly said, "Miss, when I cook for you, I wash my hands clean before I do anything else. But when I am forced to cook for scoundrels, I'll make the dishes as disgusting as possible." Ah Zhu said, "The next time I see food which you have cooked, I'll think of this and be nauseated." Old Gu said, "No, no. That's different, that's totally different." Although Ah Zhu was a servant to Young Master Murong, she was the master of the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds'. She had her own servant, chef, boatman, gardener, and other subordinates.

Ah Zhu asked, "How many enemies are there?" Old Gu said, "First came a gang of around eighteen or nineteen people. Then came a second gang of around twenty." Ah Zhu said, "There's two separate groups? What type of people are they? How are they dressed? Judging from their accents, where are they from?" Lao Gu cursed, "F*ck their mothers..." As soon as the vulgarity left his mouth, he hurriedly covered his lips with his hands, a look of terror on his face. He said, "Miss Ah Zhu, old Gu deserves to die. I...I'm so angry, I've gone stupid. One of the two groups of bad men consists of rough fellows from the north. They look like bandits. The second group comes from Sichuan. They all wear white gowns, but I don't know where they are from." Ah Zhu said, "Who are they looking for? Have they hurt anyone?" Old Gu said, "The first group of bandits came looking for the old master. The second group of weirdos came looking for the young master. We told them that the old master had passed away, and that the young master wasn't at home. They didn't believe us and ransacked the place searching for him. The servant girls have all run away already. I'm the only one who stayed, because I was too pissed. ***..." He was just about to curse again, but just as the vulgarity began to escape his lips, he managed to retract it in time. Ah Zhu saw

that his left eye was blackened, and half of his face was heavily swollen. He must have taken a few nasty blows. She no longer blamed him for taking out his resentment on the dishes by spitting and blowing his nose into them.

Ah Zhu muttered to herself, "We need to check it out ourselves. Old Gu wasn't able to make things clear." The four of them left the kitchen from a side entrance. They passed by a jasmine flower terrace and two jade cavern gates before arriving outside the flower pavilion. They were still a number of meters away from the window, but could already hear an uproar from within the building.

Ah Zhu quietly snuck to the window, then used her fingernail to poke a hole in the paper window screen. She peeped into the crack. The inside of the main hall was very bright, but only the lanterns on the east side had been lit. There, eighteen or nineteen coarse and burly men were having a little party. The tables were covered with dinner dishes and cups, and the chairs were scattered across the floor. A few people were sitting on the tables. Others were holding chicken drumsticks or pig feet in their hands and chomping away happily. Others brandished their sabres, chopping the meat on the dishes with them and then spearing the meat with the tips of their weapons before delivering the meat to their mouths.

Ah Zhu glanced towards the east side of the room. At first, she didn't notice anything. But after taking a few more glances, she couldn't help but feel cold as goosebumps appeared on her flesh. More than twenty or so men dressed in white gowns sat there solemnly. They lit a single candle on the table in front of them. The candlelight did not spread more than a few feet in circumference. She saw that the seven or so people closest to the candlelight had frozen looks on their face, displaying neither happiness nor anger, as though they were but corpses. The entire time, those people sat there without speaking or moving. If it weren't for

the fact that a few of them would blink every so often, she really might have taken them all for dead people.

Sneaking forward as well, Ah Bi grasped Ah Zhu's hand. Ah Zhu's hand was icy cold and quivering as well. Ah Bi immediately poked a second hole in the window to take a look for herself. She peered directly into the gaze of a yellow, sallow-faced individual, and their eyes met. That person who seemed half-dead, half-living stared at her. Startled, Ah Bi couldn't help but let out a quiet cry. With a pair of slamming sounds, the two windows were shattered. Four people jumped out of the windows simultaneously. Two of them were northerners, with the other two being the weirdos from Sichuan. They shouted in unison, "Who are you?"

Ah Zhu replied, "We caught a number of fresh fish and came to ask if Old Gu wanted them or not. The shrimp we have is still living and jumping about." The words she spoke were of the native Suzhou dialect. The four men initially did not understand, but seeing as how the four of them were dressed in fishermen's garbs and carrying live fish and shrimp, they figured out what Ah Zhu was saying. One of the men snatched a fish away from Ah Zhu, then shouted loudly, "Cook! Cook! Take this and go make some broth for us to drink to help dilute the alcohol!" The other northerner reached out for the fresh fish Duan Yu was holding.

Seeing that they were fish-sellers, the two Sichuanese men paid them no more mind. They returned to their seats. When they two passed by her, Ah Bi smelled a heavy, masculine musk, and couldn't resist stretching her hand out to cover her nose. One of the Sichuanese men shot her a glance and saw that when she covered her nose, her arms slid out of her sleeves slightly, revealing skin that was as white as snow and as tender and smooth as rouge. Instantly, he became highly suspicious. "How could a middle-aged fishwife have such white and tender skin?" With a backhand, he grabbed Ah Bi by the wrist and asked,

"G'dammit, how old are you?" Startled, Ah Bi wrested away from his grasp. "Whaddya doin', yeah? Touchin' people like that." Her voice was soft, tender, clear and melodious, and her movements were nimble and dexterous. The Sichuanese man only felt that his arm suddenly went numb, and with a stagger he crashed out of the room.

Now, their secret had been totally revealed. As the four men outside of the building cried out at the same time, ten more people exited the room, fully surrounding Duan Yu and the others. One of the men reached for Duan Yu's beard, tearing it off. Another man tried to grab Ah Bi, but she dodged and gave him a shove, knocking him to the floor instead.

The men began to loudly roar, "Spy, it's a spy!" "They are crooks in disguise!" "Hang them up and flog them!" They pressed the four of them into the room, then reported to an old man who sat at the east side, "Stronghold-master Yao, we captured two spies in disguise!"

That old man had a large, imposing build, with a grey beard that stretched to the pit of his stomach. He shouted, "Spies, who sent you? Sneaking around and disguising yourselves...what foul deeds are you plotting?"

Wang Yuyan said, "It isn't any fun dressing up as an old lady. Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, I'm not going to maintain the disguise anymore." As she spoke, she stretched her hand out and rubbed the mud away from her face. The mud and flour fell away, taking her 'wrinkles' with them. Before their awestruck, gaping eyes, the men watched as a middle-aged fishwife was suddenly transformed into a maiden of unsurpassing beauty. In the blink of an eye, silence reigned, and not even a whisper could be heard. The Sichuanese people to the west also had their eyes glued onto her.

Wang Yuyan said, "All of you, remove your disguises as well." She laughed towards Ah Bi, "It's all your fault. You revealed our secret!" Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, and Duan Yu immediately rubbed away the mud and flour from their faces

as well. Everyone stared at Wang Yuyan, then at Ah Zhu and Ah Bi. None of them could believe that there were such beautiful women in the world, who looked as though they had been chiseled from pure, white jade.

After a long moment, that large old man said, "Who are you? What are you doing here?" Ah Zhu laughed. "I'm the master of this place. Isn't it a bit odd for outsiders to ask me what I am doing here? Who are you? What are you doing here?" That old man nodded. "Right. So you are the master of this place? Wonderful. You are the young miss of the Murong family? Murong Bo is your daddy, then?" Ah Zhu smiled. "I'm just a servant. How could I have the fortune of being the old master's daughter? Sir, who might you be? What business have you here?" That old man heard he say she was but a servant girl, but did not immediately believe her. He muttered to himself for a while before saying, "Please invite your master to come, and I will tell him the purpose of this visit." Ah Zhu replied, "Our old master has passed away. The young master is out on a journey. Sir, what important task do you have here? Just tell us. Can it be that you cannot even reveal your name to us?" That old man said, "Fine. I am Yao Bodang, and I lead the Qin family stronghold of the province of Yunnan." [The term 'stronghold' in its Chinese context usually refers to a mountain stronghold of bandits.] Ah Zhu replied, "Pleased to meet you, pleased to meet you." Yao Bodang laughed. "You are just a little girl. Why would you be pleased to meet me?"

Wang Yuyan said, "The Qin family stronghold of Yunnan province is most famous for its 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' sabre technique. In the years after elder Qin Gongwang invented the sixty-four stances of this technique, his descendants forgot five of the stances. I hear that only fifty nine of the stances have been passed down. Stronghold-master Yao, how many stances have you learned?"

Yao Bodang was greatly astonished. He blurted out without thinking, "How is it that you know that the Qin family's 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' sabre technique originally had sixty four stances?" Wang Yuyan replied, "That's what the books say, so it probably isn't wrong, right? The five stances that you have lost are the stances, 'White Tiger Leaps Over a Ravine', 'Birthing the Wind With a Roar', 'Free-Flowing Chopping Pounce', 'Powerfully Tyrannizing Many Mountains', and...right, that fifth stance is named, 'Lion Emerges From the Appearance of Defeat'. Am I right?" Yao Bodang stroked his beard. He was aware that five of the most exquisite stances of his school of martial arts had become lost, but no one knew what the names of the techniques which had been lost. Now, hearing her speak with such certainty, he was both shocked and suspicious. He didn't know how to respond to her words.

From the west side of the room, a thirty year old man wearing white said in a deliberately strange voice, "Stronghold-master Yao is an important person with many matters to deal with. He has already forgotten the five stances which the Qin family's 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate Technique' is missing. Young Miss, what relationship do you have with Mr. Murong, Murong Bo?" Wang Yuyan replied, "Old Master Murong is my aunt's husband. Sir, what is your respected name and surname?" That man smiled coldly, "Miss, you are well-learned and are intimately familiar with stronghold-master Yao's martial arts technique. I would like to invite you to guess what my own origin is." Wang Yuyan smiled. "First, you need to demonstrate some of your abilities. I can't guess anything just based on a few words."

That man nodded. "True." He stretched his left hand into the sleeves of his right arm, and did the opposite for his right hand, as though his hands were chilled by winter's cold. He immediately snapped his hands out. Each hand was holding a strange weapon. In his left hand, he was holding a metal awl which was six or seven inches long. The tip of the

awl was split in two. In his right hand, he wielded a small, eight-faced mace. The shaft of the mace was over a foot long, and the head of the mace was smaller than most people's fists. Both weapons were small and exquisitely made, appearing almost as though they were children's toys. They seemed to be totally useless for actually fighting off opponents. As the men who sat at the east side of the room saw the weapons, some of them immediately began to loudly laugh. One of them laughed, "You're actually humiliating yourself by displaying the toys and baubles which Sichuanese babies play with?" The people who sat at the west side all glared at him angrily.

Wang Yuyan said, "Right. This is the 'Thunder God's Explosion'. Sir, I imagine that you are an expert in qinggong and hidden weapons. The books say that the 'Thunder God's Explosion' is the unique weaponry of Sichuan's Qingcheng sect, located on Mt. Qingcheng. Within the 'Qing' character, there are nine attacks; within the 'Cheng' character, there are eighteen destroying strokes. The strangeness and cunning of the techniques are difficult to fathom. Sir, I would like to guess that your surname is Sima, right?"

That entire time, the man's face was very somber. But upon hearing this girl say those words, he couldn't help but be shaken. He exchanged a few glances with three of his assistants that stood next to him. After a long time, he said, "Gusu's Murong family is well-known for having a deep, broad, and profound understanding of martial arts. You really live up to your reputation! I am Sima Lin. Miss, might I ask you if there truly are nine strikes within the 'Qing' character, and eighteen destroying strokes within the 'Cheng' character?"

Wang Yuyan replied, "This is an extremely good question. In my opinion, it would be more appropriate to say that there are ten strikes within the 'Qing' character. Although the 'iron Bodhisattva strike' and the 'iron lotus seed strike' seem superficially similar, they have totally separate usages and

really shouldn't be mixed together. With regards to the eighteen destroying strokes of the 'Cheng' character, it seems as though there is nothing particularly special or exquisite about the 'armor destroying', 'shield destroying', and 'tablet destroying' stances. It seems as though they were simply thrown in there to fill up the spaces needed for there to be a total of eighteen stances, whereas in actuality they can be discarded or perhaps merged together. In which case, there would be a total of 'fifteen destroying strokes' or 'sixteen destroying strokes', which would actually be more refined."

Listening to her words, Sima Lin was struck dumb. He had only learned seven of the techniques within the 'Qing' character, and knew nothing of the differences between the 'iron Bodhisattva strike' and the 'iron lotus seed strike'. In addition, the 'armor destroying', 'shield destroying', and 'tablet destroying' stances were the stances which he felt the most proud mastering about all his life, and which had always be considered a unique, consummate skill of his sect. He never would have imagined that this girl would say that they could be abolished. At first, he was startled; then, he was extremely angry. He thought to himself, "It's natural that the Murong family has long since known of my name and my martial arts. They want to humiliate me, and so have spun these lies and ordered this maiden to come here with scorching, humiliating words." He didn't immediately flare up. He only said, "Thank you for your advice, Miss. I've suddenly seen the light." Immediately, he turned to an assistant by his side and said, "Apprentice-brother Zhu, why don't you ask this young miss for a few pointers?"

His assistant, Zhu Baokun, was an ugly man with a face full of pock marks. He appeared to be somewhat older than Sima Lin. Aside from the white gown he wore, he also tied up his hair with a strip of white cloth, as though he were in morning. Underneath the flickering light of the candle, he appeared very sinister and secretive. He rose to his feet,

cupping his hands respectfully, then withdrew his weapons as well. He also withdrew a small mace and a short awl, both of which were identical to Sima Lin's 'Thunder God's Explosion' weapons. He said, "Miss, please advise me."

All the onlookers thought to himself, "Your weapons are totally the same as that of Sima Lin. If this girl knows his martial arts, then obviously she knows yours as well." Wang Yuyan also said, "Sir, as you wield the 'Thunder God's Explosion' weapons, naturally you belong to the Qingcheng sect as well." Sima Lin said, "This martial-brother of mine already possessed some martial arts before entering our school. Miss, I'd like to test your wisdom and see if you can discover what sect he originally came from." He thought to himself, "Even I am not too sure about the origins of brother Zhu's martial arts. It'd be rather strange if you could!" Wang Yuyan thought to herself, "This is a difficult question."

Before she had a chance to say anything, the Qin family stronghold's Yao Bodang interjected, "Sect-leader Sima, what's the point in having this young lady guess about the origins of your martial-brother? Isn't this extremely uninteresting?" Astounded, Sima Lin said, "Why is this extremely uninteresting?" Yao Bodang laughed. "Your apprentice-brother face is now filled with pock marks, which seem to be meticulously carved into his skin. Thus, his true features can't be too exquisite to look at." Everyone on the western side of the room exploded into laughter. [True features and true origins can share the same characters.]

All his life, the thing which Zhu Baokun hated the most was others making fun of his pockmarked face. Now, hearing Yao Bodang so openly ridicule him, he could he hold his temper? Without caring that Yao Bodang was a famous hero of the north and the master of a stronghold, he aimed the steel awl in his left hand towards Yao Bodang's chest, then struck the awl with the steel mace in his right hand. A violent 'chi' sound split the air with a sharp roar as a host of

hidden weapons shot forth from the awl and towards Yao Bodang's chest.

As soon as the Qin family stronghold and the Qingcheng sect had entered the pavilion, they had taken each other's measure. Neither side offered any greetings to the other. They glared at each other and humphed at each other. In all likelihood, if Wang Yuyan and the others had not arrived, they would have gotten into a fight with each other by now. In insulting Zhu Baokun, Yao Bodang originally only wanted to tease him a little. He never would have imagined that the other party would attack so quickly. The secret weapons flew towards him with great haste. He didn't even have the time to draw out his sabre. With his left hand, he snatched a candlestick which lay on top of the table in front of him, then chopped at the hidden weapons. With a clanging sound, the hidden weapons were redirected upwards, and with a thudding sound embedded themselves into the ceiling. Now, they could be clearly seen. The hidden weapons were three-inch long steel needles. Although the needles were short, the force behind them was tremendous. Yao Bodang's left hand went numb, and the candlestick slipped from his grasp. With a clanking sound, it hit the floor.

The bandits of the Qin family stronghold pulled out their sabres. In a loud voice, they cried out, "So you are using hidden weapons to harm others?" "What a valiant hero you are!" "Shameless! I'll f*ck your grandmother, hard!" A very fat person was filled with the most obscenities, even cursing eighteen generation's worth of the other party's ancestors. But the people of Qingcheng sect only continued to sit there in that strange silence, as though neither seeing nor hearing the words from the Qin family stronghold.

Earlier, when Yao Bodang snatched the candlestick to block the hidden weapons, he didn't have a very firm grip. But having his weapon being shaken from his hand by tiny steel needles despite his decades of internal energy training was, by the accepted rules of wulin, a loss for him. He

thought to himself, "The opponent's martial arts are extremely strange. From what the young lady said, within the Qingcheng sect's martial arts, the 'Qing' character has nine strikes, all of which are based upon hidden weaponry. If I'm not careful, I'm going to be in trouble." He immediately waved his arm and quieted the noisy calls of his subordinates. He laughed, "Brother Zhu, this technique of yours was extremely handsome, but also extremely vicious! What is it called?"

Zhu Baokun let out a cold laugh, but did not respond.

The fat man amongst the Qin family stronghold said, "Most likely, it is called, 'No sense of shame or face, launching ambushes against others!'" Another middle-aged person laughed, "He never had any face to begin with. The name you just gave is very good. It's quite appropriate and suits them. Clearly, you are well-learned and lettered! Well-learned indeed!" Within his words was a hidden ridicule directed once more to Zhu Baokun's pock-marks.

Wang Yuyan shook her head. In a soft voice, she said, "Stronghold-master Yao, now you are at fault." Yao Bodang said, "How?" Wang Yuyan said, "It's possible for anyone to suffer an illness or be wounded. When a person is young and trips and falls, it's possible that his leg might become crippled. When fighting with others, it's possible to lose a hand or an eye. It's extremely ordinary for the people of wulin to have wounds or scars on them, am I right?" Yao Bodang could only nod his head. Wang Yuyan continued, "When he was young, Mr. Zhu suffered from a foul disease which left him with some scars. What's so funny about that? In judging whether a male is a true, stalwart man, the first thing to consider is his character and his moral quality. The second thing to consider is his ability and his competence. The third would be his learning and his martial arts abilities. What does his facial appearance have to do with anything?"

Yao Bodang was rendered speechless. He broke out in loud laughter, then said, "There is some reason in your

words, Miss. By that logic, this old man is at fault for mocking brother Zhu."

Wang Yuyan laughed, "Old Master, for you to be able to freely admit to your mistakes shows that you are an upright, honest, and honorable man." She turned her face to Zhu Baokun, then shook her head and said, "Won't do, that won't work." When she said these words, a gentle, tender, sympathizing look was on her face, as though she were an older sister who was watching her younger brother exhaust himself trying to do something which he didn't have the strength to do. Her words were both admonishing and intimate.

Zhu Baokun, upon hearing her say that it was very normal for people of the wulin to have battle scars or wounds, and that a man should be judged first and foremost by his character and his accomplishments, felt very happy. All his life, he had been unhappy about his pockmarked face. He had never heard anyone address the issue so sincerely and reasonably. Now, hearing her say, "Won't do, that won't work," he asked, "Miss, what do you mean?" He thought to himself, "Is she saying that this needle technique of mine, the 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart', won't do, and won't work? She doesn't know that there are twelve steel needles hidden within my awl. If I didn't stop and instead repeatedly struck it with my mace, I would have taken that old fellow's life a long time ago. Only, I cannot reveal my secret in front of Sima Lin."

Only to hear Wang Yuyan said, "This 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart' needle technique of yours truly is an overbearing hidden weapon technique..." Zhu Baokun's body trembled, and he let out a soft cry. Sima Lin and two other experts of Qingcheng sect also let out a simultaneous shout of, "What?!" The expression on Zhu Baokun's face changed, and he said, "Miss, you are wrong. This was not the 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart' needle technique. It is our Qingcheng sect's hidden weaponry technique, the

fourth strike within the 'Qing' character, named the 'Green Hornet' nail technique." Wang Yuyan smiled. "It did appear as though you used the 'Green Hornet' strike. When you executed the 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart' needle technique, the tools and techniques you used are the same as that of the 'Green Hornet' nail technique. But the essential nature of hidden weaponry lies neither in the tools nor in the technique, but in the hidden weapon's force and power. Everyone uses steel needles, but the force which Shaolin disciples release is unique to Shaolin, and the force which the Kunlun sect releases is unique to Kunlun. This cannot be faked. Yours is..."

Suddenly, a murderous look filled Zhu Baokun's eyes. He suddenly raised the steel awl to his chest. All he needed to do was to strike the awl with his mace, and the steel needles would instantly shoot towards Wang Yuyan...

Half the people watching let out cries of alarm. Earlier, when he attacked Yao Bodang, his movements were very fast and the power released was very strong. Very few hidden weapon techniques could compare to it. Obviously, there was an extremely powerful release mechanism hidden within the awl, as it was definitely impossible for any human force to create such an effect. Moreover, the tip of the awl was curved and split, making it difficult for others to believe that steel needles could shoot out from it. No one knew that the hollow cavity within the awl was straight. Fortunately, Yao Bodang was quick of eye and fleet of hand and thus managed to avoid disaster. If he released the hidden weapons towards Wang Yuyan, how could a beautiful, delicate woman such as her possibly avoid or dodge it? But seeing how beautiful and gentle she appeared, Zhu Baokun couldn't bear to kill her. In addition, he was still grateful for how she had argued on his behalf earlier. He shouted, "Miss, don't talk too much and bring disaster upon yourself!"

Just at this moment, a person rushed forward and placed himself in front of Wang Yuyan. It was Duan Yu.

Wang Yuyan smiled. "Young Gentleman Duan, many thanks! Mr. Zhu, many thanks to you as well for not killing me. But even if you kill me, there's no point. The Qingcheng sect and the Penglai sect have been enemies for generations. Your scheme was already tried over eighty years ago, by your venerable sect's seventh sect leader, Haifeng Zi. I'm afraid that his intelligence and martial arts is not one whit inferior to your own."

Upon hearing these words, the gaze of every member present of the Qingcheng sect turned towards Zhu Baokun. They mercilessly glared at him, all of them thinking to themselves, "Can it be that he is a member of our mortal enemy, the Penglai sect, who is in our sect undercover? How is it that he speaks with the Sichuanese accent, and doesn't have the slightest trace of a Shandong accent?"

The eastern peninsula of the Shandong province was lorded over by the Penglai sect. Although they were located in the east, and Sichuan's Qingcheng sect was located in the west, hundreds of years ago a bitter enmity was laid down by experts of their respective sects. From that time forth, each would make retaliatory attacks upon the other, committing many cruel and vicious revenge killings. Both sects possessed consummate martial arts techniques that could counter and restrain the other. In fact, the enmity laid down centuries ago was created by disagreements in a discussion on martial arts. After over ten violent battles and killings, in the end the Penglai sect was unable to defeat the Qingcheng sect, but the Qingcheng sect was also unable to overcome the Penglai sect. Every time the two came to battle, Masters and experts from both sides would suffer wounds and often perish together, ending the battle in common ruin.

The Haifeng Zi which Wang Yuyan spoke of was an outstanding talent within the Penglai sect. He carefully examined the strengths and weaknesses of the martial arts of both schools, knowing that although it would not be too

hard for him to surpass the Qingcheng sect based upon his own abilities, in the future, after he died and the Qingcheng sect produced a wise and talented student of its own, the Qingcheng would once more have surpassed his own sect. In order to finish the job once and for all, he sent his most talented disciple to sneak into the Qingcheng sect and steal their martial arts. In this way, he would 'know himself and know his enemy, proving victorious in every battle'. But his disciple had not fully mastered his martial arts and was discovered and executed by disciples of the Qingcheng sect. After this, the enmity between the two groups became only deeper as both sides began to guard against the other side stealing their secrets.

Within these past few decades, the Qingcheng sect set down a rule where they would not accept northerners as students. No students who spoke with any northern accents were accepted. Forget about having a Shandong accent, even if the applicant had the slightest Hebei, Henan, Shanxi, or Shaanxi accent. Later on, the rules became even more rigid, and they began to only accept disciples from Sichuan alone.

The 'Green Hornet' nail technique was a hidden weapon technique unique to the Qingcheng sect, whereas the 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart' needle technique belonged to the Penglai sect. Zhu Baokun clearly used the 'Green Hornet' nail technique, but Wang Yuyan continued to insist that he used the 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart' needle technique. This caused everyone in the Qingcheng sect to be filled with shock and dread. It must be known that the Penglai sect had a rule which was similar to that of the Qingcheng sect; they would only accept disciples from Shandong. Moreover, the people from the eastern part of Shandong were considered better. People from western Shandong or southern Shandong would find it extremely difficult to be allowed into the Penglai sect. It wouldn't be impossible for a person to put on a disguise and not reveal

himself, but it would be extremely difficult for a person to change his manner of speaking so completely that in a thousand words, he wouldn't say a single word with a slightly strange accent. Zhu Baokun came from the Zhu family of the Guan county of Sichuan, a famous, aristocratic family of western Sichuan. How could he be a disciple of the Penglai sect? Everyone present would never have imagined it in their wildest dreams. Earlier, when Sima Lin wanted Wang Yuyan to guess his origins, all he wanted to do was stump this girl with a tough riddle. He did not suspect Zhu Baokun at all. How could he have imagined that he would receive such a soul-shaking response?

The person who was most startled of all was naturally Zhu Baokun himself. As it was, his original teacher was a Daoist priest named Dulingzi. In youth, Dulingzi had been greatly harmed by the Qingcheng sect, and incessantly schemed to revenge himself upon the Qingcheng sect. He snuck around all of Sichuan, trying to find ways by which he could cause them harm. One year, he met the young Zhu Baokun at the Guan county. At this point, Zhu Baokun was still but a child, but showed an extremely good bone structure and had a very good foundation for learning martial arts. Thus, Dulingzi came up with a plot. He ordered people to disguise themselves as Jiangnan pirates and had them sneak into the Zhu family, tie up the family members, and then, after looting the place, prepare to rape the two daughters of the Zhu family and execute the rest. Dulingzi himself was outside the entire time. He waited until the critical moment, then stepped forth bravely, chased away all the fake bandits, retrieved all of their belongings, and preserved the chastity of the two daughters of the Zhu family. The master of the Zhu family was naturally filled with boundless gratitude towards Dulingzi.

Dulingzi deliberately provoked him, saying, "If one does not possess first-class martial arts, no matter how rich you are, you can still be bullied by robbers and bandits. This

group of bandits possessed some decent abilities. They've been beaten off today, but it is likely that they will come back for another try some other day." The Zhu family was an extremely powerful and well-known aristocratic family in the area. Before the master's very eyes, the guards and martial arts instructors he had invited were knocked down with three punches and two kicks. Now, hearing that the bandits would come back again soon, he was so frightened that his soul almost left him, and he begged Dulingzi to stay. Dulingzi insincerely refused for a while, then 'reluctantly' agreed to stay. After a short period of time had passed, he managed to convince Zhu Baokun to kowtow to him as his disciple.

Aside from his single-minded enmity towards the Qingcheng sect, Dulingzi himself was not really a bad person, and possessed extremely capable martial arts. He exhorted the Zhu family to carefully guard the secret of his presence, and secretly taught Zhu Baokun martial arts. After ten years or so, Zhu Baokun became one of the most outstanding individuals within the Penglai sect. This Dulingzi fellow really was patient. After settling down in the Zhu family household, he immediately disguised himself as a mute person. From beginning to end, he did not say a single word to a single person. When teaching Zhu Baokun martial arts, he would only demonstrate the techniques using his hands and feet, or manually write down the instructions for Zhu Baokun to read. He wouldn't say a single word or reveal his Shandong accent. Thus, although Zhu Baokun had associated with him for over ten years, he had never heard a single word spoken with the Shandong accent.

After Zhu Baokun fully completed his martial arts training, Dulingzi wrote down the entire ins and outs of the situation and told his student to act as he saw fit. Although, he naturally left out the part where he had people dress up as robbers to attack the Zhu family. In Zhu Baokun's heart,

not only had his master saved his entire family, over the past ten years, his master had treated him with great benevolence and kindness, passing down to him all of the Penglai sect's martial arts techniques. He had long since felt boundless gratitude towards his master, and once he understood what his master wanted, he didn't hesitate in the slightest. He immediately headed towards Mt. Qingcheng, putting himself under the 'tutelage' of the Qingcheng sect's then-leader, Sima Wei. Sima Wei was Sima Lin's father.

At this point in time, Zhu Baokun was no longer a child, and moreover declared himself as having learned some low level martial arts from the guards which his family had hired. At first, Sima Wei was unwilling to accept him. But the Zhu family was a very rich family in western Sichuan, possessing both wealth and power. Although the Qingcheng sect belonged to the martial world, in the end, they were still located in Sichuan. They were unwilling to become estranged from the powerful and wealthy local noble clans. In addition, accepting a member of the Zhu family as a disciple would only enhance their sect's prestige. Thus, Sima Wei agreed in the end. While teaching him their skills, they found that Zhu Baokun already possessed quite impressive martial arts. But whenever they tried to question him, Zhu Baokun, in accordance with what his master Dulingzi had taught him to do, would make up something and throw them off. Sima Wei, wanting to give his father some face, did not pursue the matter too much. He thought to himself that for a scion of a rich family to reach such a level of martial arts was already very difficult.

After entering the Qingcheng sect, Zhu Baokun focused on a specific number of martial arts techniques as instructed by Dulingzi. On New Year's Day and during other festivals, he gave very lavish gifts to his master and his fellow apprentices. Whenever his master needed anything done, he wouldn't wait for any actual request to be made before

perfectly fulfilling his master's wants. After all, his family had plenty of money, which made these things easy. Sima Wei always felt rather awkward about this, and thus poured his energy in teaching Zhu Baokun martial arts, holding nothing back and keeping nothing hidden. Thus, within seven or eight years, Zhu Baokun had learned the ultimate skills of the Qingcheng sect.

Three or four years ago, Dulingzi had originally ordered Zhu Baokun to go to Mt. Penglai and display the martial arts of the Qingcheng sect, with the aim of overturning the Qingcheng sect with this knowledge. But after staying with the Qingcheng sect for so many years, Zhu Baokun felt that Sima Wei treated him very well. When teaching him martial arts, Sima Wei treated him as though he were his own son. Zhu Baokun could not bear the thought of him personally causing the destruction of the Qingcheng sect and slaughtering Sima Wei's entire family. He secretly decided, "I cannot make my move until after master Sima Wei passes away first. Martial-brother Sima Lin's treatment of me is nothing special; it's no big deal if I kill him." Thus, he delayed for a few years. Dulingzi tried to hasten him several times, but each time, Zhu Baokun would reply that he had not fully learned the nine strikes of the 'Qing' character and the eighteen destroying strokes of the 'Cheng' character. After having expended so much blood and sweat on this scheme, he was unwilling to 'fail to build a mound for the lack of one last pail of dirt'. He only exhorted Zhu Baokun to learn the secrets as quickly as possible, so that they could launch an attack.

However, during the past winter, Sima Wei was killed within the eastern Sichuan city of Baidi by an enemy who used Qingcheng sect's own 'Moon Destroying Awl' technique of the eighteen destroying strokes of the 'Cheng' character. The 'Moon Destroying Awl' technique pierced through Sima Wei's ear, driving through his brain and causing his death. Although the 'Moon Destroying Awl' technique had the word

'Awl' in its name, in actuality it did not use an awl. Instead, the practitioner would form his five fingers into a claw, then use profound internal strength to drive the claw through the opponent's ear.

Sima Lin and Zhu Baokun were in Chengdu when they received this news. They rushed to Baidi overnight. After discovering how Sima Wei died, the two of them were both sorrowful and afraid. They all thought to themselves that within the Qingcheng sect, aside from Sima Wei himself, only Sima Lin, Zhu Baokun, and two other venerable experts could use the 'Moon Destroying Awl' technique. But when this calamity happened, all four of them were clearly in Chengdu, as they were together during that period of time. None of them could suspect each other. Thus, aside from the famous family which would 'use the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent', that being Gusu's Murong family, no one else could have killed him. The Qingcheng sect immediately turned out in full force, gathering all of their experts and going to Gusu, intending to exact revenge upon the Murong family.

Before heading out, Zhu Baokun secretly asked Dulingzi if it was the Penglai sect which did the deed. Dulingzi wrote, "Sima Lin's level of martial arts is very close to that of my own. If I were to kill him, I would have to use the 'Lord of Heaven Replenishes the Heart' technique to kill him. If a group of people were to besiege him, they would have to use our 'Iron Crutch' formation." Zhu Baokun thought to himself that this made sense. By now, he was fully aware that neither of his two masters was inferior to the other in martial arts. When it comes to using the 'Moon Destroying Awl' to kill Sima Wei, not only did Dulingzi not know this technique, even if he knew it, his proficiency in it couldn't possibly be superior to Sima Wei's. With no more doubt in his mind, he came with Sima Lin to Jiangnan to seek revenge. Dulingzi did not try to obstruct him, only telling him to be careful. He was to keep his eyes and ears open, but not to throw away

his life on behalf of the Qingcheng sect.

After arriving in Suzhou, they sent people inquiring all over the place. It was only with great difficulty that they arrived at the 'Water Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds'. The Qin family stronghold of Yunnan had arrived just before them. The rules of the Qingcheng sect were extremely rigid; without the sect-leader's permission, no one dared to rashly say or do anything. Seeing how unorthodox and wild the people of the Qin family stronghold, they felt contempt towards them in their heart. Thus, both sides spoke very insultingly towards the other. The Qingcheng sect had come on a mission of revenge, and thus did not disturb a single blade of grass, and ate only the food they themselves had brought. They actually got something good out of this, as none of the members of the Qingcheng sect tasted old Gu's snot, saliva, or the mud from his hands.

After Wang Yuyan and the other three had arrived, strange things started to happen. When Zhu Baokun used the Qingcheng sect's 'Green Hornet' nail technique to shoot out the steel needles in the past, not even Sima Wei would be suspicious in the slightest. He never could have imagined that this little girl, Wang Yuyan, would expose the truth of the matter in a single sentence. Zhu Baokun did not manage to act quickly enough to silence her; still remembering her kind words from earlier, he hesitated for but a moment and lost the opportunity. In addition, Sima Lin and the others had already heard the words, 'Lord of Heaven Replenishing the Heart needle technique'. Even if he killed Wang Yuyan, it would only serve to make him look all the more treacherous and wicked.

At this moment, Zhu Baokun's mind was thrown in confusion, and cold sweat began to drip from his head. Turning around, he saw that Sima Lin and the others all had their hands folded within their sleeves, and were staring at him with fierce glares.

Sima Lin icily said, "Mr. Zhu, so you belong to the Penglai sect?" He no longer address Zhu Baokun as 'martial-brother', instead calling him 'Mr. Zhu'. Clearly, he no longer considered him as being part of the same school.

Zhu Baokun could neither admit to it nor deny it. An extremely awkward look was on his face.

Sima Lin's eyes opened wide, and he glared at Zhu Baokun. "You came to the Qingcheng sect to steal our skills, then, after learning the 'Moon Destroying Awl', used it to murder my father. You brutal, unscrupulous, cold-blooded cur, you are far too vile!" Sweeping his arms from his sleeves, he withdrew the 'Thunder God's Explosion' from his sleeves. He thought to himself that after Zhu Baokun had learned their martial arts, he must have taught it to the masters of the Penglai sect. Although Zhu Baokun was in Chengdu when his father died, after the Penglai sect's experts learned this technique, any of them could have killed his father.

Zhu Baokun's face was ashen. He thought to himself that although it was true that his master Dulingzi had sent him into the Qingcheng sect with this intention, to date he had not divulged a single secret of the Qingcheng sect. But with the situation having reached this point, how could he possibly explain? It seemed that a violent battle was about to occur. The enemy had more people and a stronger force. The skills of Sima Lin and the two other experts were not one whit inferior to his own. Today, it seemed as though he was about to lose his life. He thought to himself, "Although I did not do this, I did have the intention of betraying my master. Even if I am killed by the Qingcheng sect, it would be no more than receiving just punishment for my deeds." He immediately hardened his heart, then said, "Our master definitely was not harmed by me."

Sima Lin shouted, "Naturally, you yourself did not do the deed, but you taught the technique to the person who did. What's the difference between this and you personally

killing him?" He said to the two tall, thin old men by his side, "Martial-uncles Jiang and Meng, when dealing with traitors like this, there's no need for us to adhere to the martial world's rules of one-on-one duels. Let's fight him together!" The two old men nodded, then withdrew their hands from their sleeves. They, too, were wielding the 'Thunder God's Explosion' weapons.

Zhu Baokun took a few steps back, resting his back against one of the room's pillars to prevent himself from being encircled. Sima Lin loudly cried, "Kill this traitor and avenge my father!" He charged forward, lifting his mace and delivering a powerful blow towards the top of Zhu Baokun's skull. Zhu Baokun sidestepped and let the blow pass by him, then countered with an awl-strike. The old man surnamed Jiang shouted, "You are fine fellow, you traitor! You still have the stones to use the martial arts techniques of our sect!" With his left hand, he struck out with the awl towards Zhu Baokun's throat, while with his right hand he struck out with his mace three times, using the 'Phoenix Nodding' technique.

The followers of the Qin family stronghold saw that the old man surnamed Jiang wielded the mace with superb skill, and that his techniques were extremely strange. All of them were extremely intrigued. Yao Bodang and the others secretly nodded, thinking to themselves, "The fame of the Qingcheng sect shakes western Sichuan. It looks like this isn't due to luck." Sima Lin was impatient in desiring to avenge his father, and thus his attacks were too rash and hasty. Zhu Baokun was consequently able to defend against them. But the two old men generated their internal energy, executing their attacks in accordance with the four critical points of the Qingcheng style: 'Steady', 'Ruthless', 'Secret', and 'Fierce'. Their awls pierced and their maces struck, with each blow directed towards his vital points. Zhu Baokun was

besieged on all sides, and was instantly surrounded by danger.

Zhu Baokun knew by heart all of the mace and awl techniques which the three men were employing. After seeing each stance, he would be able to guess what the next three or four stances would be. This was the only reason why he was able to hold out against the three of them at the same time without being defeated. After ten or more stances, he felt sourness in his heart. He secretly thought to himself, "Master Sima truly treated me extremely well. I know every single one of these techniques which Sima Lin and these two martial-uncles are using. When teaching someone about the weak points in one's own techniques, it's very easy and common for the teacher to intentionally hold things back and not teach the student the most important points. At this critical life-and-death juncture, the three of them are naturally holding nothing back and going all out. It seems I really have been taught everything that he knew about Qingcheng sect's martial arts." His heart swelling with feelings of gratitude and indebtedness towards his master, he couldn't help but cry out, "I definitely did not cause my master's death..."

With his thoughts going astray, Sima Lin rushed forward and was now only a few feet away from him. Qingcheng sect's weapons were all short, and thus they were naturally most deadly when used in close hand to hand combat. If Sima Lin was fighting a member of any other sect, when he charged in he would have gained a seventy or eighty percent chance of winning. But since Zhu Baokun knew the same martial arts as he did, neither of them gained an advantage. Beneath the flickering candlelight, everyone present felt as though their vision was blurring. All they could see was that both Sima Lin and Zhu Baokun executed their stances very quickly. Their hands weaving and waving about, in the blink of an eye they had each executed seven or eight stances. The steel awls pierced upwards and jabbed

downwards, while the steel maces struck horizontally and smashed vertically downwards. It was as though both of them had gone insane. But each of them was so familiar with the other's techniques that whenever one of them executed an attack, the counterattack came to the other as naturally as breathing. They had been instructed by the same teacher, and thus their techniques and styles were identical. Sima Li was young and strong, but Zhu Baokun possessed an abundance of varied experiences. In a short period of time, tens of stances had been exchanged. The onlookers could hear the clinking and clanging sounds as their weapons clashes, but could no longer tell what attacks and defenses each were using.

The two elders, seeing that Sima Li was unable to achieve victory despite a long battle, suddenly let out a sharp whistle, then rolled on the floor towards them, attacking Zhu Baokun's lower extremities.

Most of the people who use short weapons, save for females, knew various rolling and jumping techniques which would cause the opponent to be uncertain as to how to respond. Zhu Baokun, too, was originally very familiar with this attack of theirs, known as the 'Thunder God's Earth Explosion', but with his hands occupied defending against Sima Li's awl and mace, he had nothing left to guard against the two elders. All he could do was run around and try to dodge or jump away. Elder Jiang's steel mace struck at him from the left, while elder Meng's awl stabbed from the right. Zhu Baokun leapt up and delivered a flying kick to elder Meng's lower jaw. Elder Meng cursed, "Son of a tortoise, so you are going all out?" He dodged to the side. Elder Jiang charged forwards, delivering a sweeping attack with his mace, just as Sima Lin's mace struck towards Zhu Baokun's forehead. Caught between a rock and a hard place, Zhu Baokun had to choose between the lesser of two evils. Lifting his weapon, he blocked Sima Lin's attack, while receiving a stiff blow to his left leg from Elder Jiang's mace.

Although the mace was small, the crushing force of its blows was very formidable. Zhu Baokun felt the pain in the very marrow of his bones. For the moment, he couldn't even be sure as to whether or not his leg bone was already snapped. With a clanging sound, two maces met and sparks exploded. He then let out a cry as elder Meng's awl pierced his left leg as well.

He was actually capable of dodging this strike, but if he had done so, the 'Thunder God's Earth Explosion' technique which the two elders were using would have united and transformed into the 'Earth Goddess's Thunder Web' attack, which he would have been unable to resist. Since his left leg might already be broken, he might as well just let it receive some more punishment. Within a few more strokes, bright blood began to splash from his leg, spraying red dots all across the walls.

Wang Yuyan saw Ah Zhu crease her forehead and pucker her lips in a frown. She knew that Ah Zhu hated watching this bunch of people battle against each other here and dirty her clean and tidy house. Smiling, she called out, "Hey, stop fighting! If you have problems, let's talk them out. Why be so unreasonable?" Sima Lin and the others wanted to execute the 'evil traitor who murdered their master' on the spot. Zhu Baokun was willing to stop fighting, but how could he? Seeing how the four of them continued to fight violently and ignore her words, and how it was primarily Sima Lin and the two elders who kept the fight going, she said, "All of you, stop fighting!" Sima Lin roared back, "I will not live under the same sky with the man who murdered my father! How can I not avenge him? What are you babbling about?" Wang Yuyan said, "If you don't stop, I'm going to help him!"

Sima Lin's heart went cold. He thought to himself, "This beautiful girl sees very clearly and thoroughly. I imagine her martial arts skills are excellent as well. If she helps the other side, things would get a bit troublesome." Then he thought, "With so many experts of our Qingcheng sect here, if push

comes to shove we can mob them. Can it be that we'll all be defeated by such a delicate-looking girl?" He added more force to his blows, pelting vicious blows towards Zhu Baokun like the beating of the rain or the raging of the wind.

Wang Yuyan said, "Mr. Zhu, first use, the 'Force of Li Cunxiao Striking the Tiger', then use 'Zhang Guolao Riding the Donkey Backwards'!" [As the reader will have guessed, Li Cunxiao and Zhang Guolao are famous legendary figures.] Zhu Baokun was startled. He thought to himself, "The first stance belongs to the Qingcheng sect, but the second comes from the Penglai sect. These two definitely cannot be mixed together. How can I use them in succession?" But right now, the situation was critical. How could he have the time to ponder in depth? He executed the 'Force of Li Cunxiao Striking the Tiger' technique, and with a pair of 'dang' sounds, just managed to block two mace blows from Sima Lin and elder Jiang. Following this, he turned around and took three crooked steps backwards, each step taken precisely before an ambushing awl attack by elder Jiang. This stance which elder Jiang used was a combination attack using both the mace and the awl, with three strikes in total. It was extremely sinister and vicious. Each step Zhu Baokun took, he staggered as though he were drunk, and the execution was totally unorthodox. But at the most critical moment of each attack, he managed to avoid the opponent's ruthless strikes. It was as though the two of them had practiced this in advance and were now showing off their abilities.

These three ambushing strikes were extremely ingenious, but the dodges were even more exquisite. All of the members of the Qin family stronghold watching were rapt and breathless. After every dodge, they let out an exclamation in unison, and by the time all three attacks were dodged, they had let out three mighty shouts. The faces of the disciples of the Qingcheng sect were very

gloomy to begin with, but now they looked all the more terrible to behold.

Duan Yu shouted out, "Wonderful, wonderful! Brother Zhu, whatever Miss Wang tells you to do, do it. I promise you won't lose out by doing so!"

When Zhu Baokun executed this 'Zhang Guolao Riding the Donkey Backwards' technique, he had no idea what the results might be. His head was filled with a murky fog, and he felt that life and death were the same, and had long since cast away any hopes of living. He didn't imagine that these two techniques from the Qingcheng sect and the Penglai sect could actually be executed together and allow him to evade those three vicious blows. The panic in his heart was far greater than even that of the members of the Qin family stronghold, or of the members of the Qingcheng sect.

He heard Wang Yuyan call out, "First execute 'Han Xiangzi Embraces the Snow of the Blue Gate', then execute the 'Crooked Path Opens to the Netherworld'!" The first technique belonged to the Penglai sect, and the second belonged to the Qingcheng sect. Without even thinking, Zhu Baokun drew a circle in front of him using his mace and his awl in a defensive sealing movement. Just at this moment, Sima Lin and elder Meng thrust at him with their awls. The three of them had actually executed their attacks at the same time, but in the eyes of outsiders, it seemed as though Zhu Baokun had completed his defensive movement first, while Sima Lin and elder Meng, despite seeing his defensive movement and finding no flaws in his defense, still insisted on using a large amount of energy in a useless attack. Their two awls connected with his mace, and with a clanging sound, the two awls were flicked aside. Zhu Baokun didn't hesitate at all, and immediately stooped down and launched a backwards piercing strike with his awl.

Elder Jiang was just about to strike him from behind. He never imagined that Zhu Baokun's awl would strike at him at this moment, from this angle. The 'Crooked Path Opens to

the Netherworld' technique belonged to the Qingcheng sect, and elder Jiang knew it by heart. Using the attack in such a manner was totally antithetical to the basic principles of Qingcheng sect martial arts. If Zhu Baokun, while practicing martial arts, had normally executed the technique in such a way, elder Jiang would have burst into loud laughter. But by using such an unreasonable attack, elder Jiang was put into a position where he was about to commit suicide, as he was rushing forwards with his body in line with the tip of the awl. He knew that he was in a disastrous position, but couldn't retract his charging force in time. With a puffing sound, the awl pierced into his waist. His body swayed, and he fell to the floor. Two disciples of the Qingcheng sect ran forwards, grabbed him, then carried him away.

Sima Lin cursed, "Zhu Baokun, you son of a turtle, you just hurt martial-uncle Jiang with your own hands. You can't claim this is false as well, right?" Wang Yuyan said, "I told him to hurt elder Jiang. Please, stay your hands!" Sima Lin angrily said, "If you're really so capable, tell him how to kill me!" Wang Yuyan smiled. "Mr. Zhu, first use the technique, 'Iron-Crutched Li Passes Through a Tunnel Into the Front Yard Beneath the Moon,' then use the technique, 'Iron-Crutched Li Discusses the Way in a Jade Cavern.'"

Zhu Baokun replied, "Yes!" He thought to himself, "Within the Penglai sect's martial arts techniques, there are only the stances, 'Lu Chunyang Passes Through a Tunnel Into the Front Yard Beneath the Moon' and 'Han Zhongli Discusses the Way in a Jade Cavern.' How did Iron-Crutched Li get mixed up into this? Most likely, this girl's understanding of our school's martial arts technique still has its limits, and she misspoke." But at this critical moment, Sima Lin and elder Meng definitely would not give him the chance to ask her to clarify. All he could do was use his normal techniques and execute 'Lu Chunyang Passes Through a Tunnel Into the Front Yard Beneath the Moon'.

This technique, 'Passing Through a Tunnel Into the Front Yard Beneath the Moon', was originally meant to be executed by taking a large step forward, and was possessed of natural grace and elegance, as though someone were flying through the air. But after his left leg received two serious wounds, when he took a large step he was limping. How could he appear to be like Lu Chunyang? He looked one hundred percent like Iron-Crutched Li. But even though he was forced to limp forwards, he still received a great advantage from this motion. The two awl strikes which Sima Lin had just struck out with hit nothing but the air. Next, when he executed the 'Han Zhongli Discusses the Way in a Jade Cavern' technique, his left leg was still limping and his entire body was inclined towards the left. He used the mace in his right hand as a fan, sweeping it across his body. Just at this moment, elder Meng's head came into contact with his mace. With a clapping sound, the mace hit him right in the mouth. Ten of his teeth were immediately knocked out of his mouth and fell to the floor. It was so painful that he yelled and jumped up like a madman. He threw away his weapons, pressing both hands to his mouth as he sat down on the floor.

Sima Lin was secretly shocked, but for the moment didn't know what to do. Should he continue to fight, or temporarily withdraw and gain his revenge another day? The two techniques which Wang Yuyan had instructed Zhu Baokun use were simply too miraculous. She had calculated that after those three earlier techniques, elder Meng would charge towards Zhu Baokun's right hand side. When Zhu Baokun struck out with his hammer at that moment, it was perfectly aligned with elder Meng's mouth. Since Zhu Baokun's leg was crippled, 'Han Zhongli Discusses the Way in a Jade Cavern' turned into 'Iron-Crutched Li Discusses the Way in a Jade Cavern,' and the mace struck out at an angle. If he hadn't been crippled and the mace came out normally, it would have missed by a few inches. Her calculations were

extremely ingenious and her predictions of the opponent's actions were very accurate. It truly was shocking and astonishing.

Sima Lin thought to himself, "If I want to kill Zhu Baokun, this son of a turtle, first I'll need to think of a way to shut this girl's mouth and keep her from giving him advice." But just as he was trying to think of a strategy by which he could harm Wang Yuyan, he heard her say, "Mr. Zhu, you are a disciple of the Penglai sect. For you to deceive your way into the Qingcheng sect in order to steal their martial arts is extremely inappropriate. However, I do believe that you were not the one who harmed the Old Master, Sima Wei. Based on your level of martial arts, even if you taught another expert the skills of the Qingcheng sect, he definitely would not be able to use the 'Moon Destroying Awl' technique to kill old master Sima Wei. But you are still to blame for stealing other people's martial arts secrets. Quick, go apologize to sect-leader Sima, and we'll consider this matter settled."

Zhu Baokun thought that her words were just. In addition, she had saved his life, as he had only escaped from danger based on her advice. He could not disobey her commands, and immediately bowed deeply towards Sima Lin. He said, "Martial-brother sect-leader, it is your junior brother's fault.."

Sima Lin leapt to one side, then fiercely cursed, "You bastard, you son of a turtle, you still have the face and the audacity to call me your martial-brother sect-leader?"

Wang Yuyan called out, "Quick! 'Sauntering About the East China Sea!'

Zhu Baokun's heart went cold. He immediately rose up and leapt three feet into the air. With a number of 'chi' sounds, over ten 'Green Hornet' nail projectiles passed underneath his feet, just barely missing him. If it hadn't been for Wang Yuyan's warning, as well as her specifically instructing him to use 'Sauntering About the East China Sea'

technique rather than simply saying 'Beware his hidden projectiles!', his focus would have been on the opponent. How could he have guessed that Sima Lin would shoot out 'Green Hornet' nails from his sleeves? By then, it would have been too late to dodge.

The technique Sima Lin had just used was named 'Heaven and Earth Within the Sleeves'. This was an ultimate skill which the Sima family passed down only to their children and not to the other disciples of the Qingcheng sect. This was a household rule, and not even the two elders knew this technique. Sima Wei did not pass this skill to Zhu Baokun because he had to obey the ancestral rules. This couldn't be considered 'hiding' something from him. Zhu Baokun couldn't have imagined that Sima Lin, without batting an eye, only needed to tuck his hands inside his sleeves and the hidden weaponry would erupt from the 'Green Hornet' nail mechanism hidden within. Wang Yuyan not only exposed this trick, but even instructed him on how to avoid the hidden weapons, using the Penglai sect's technique, 'Sauntering About the East China Sea'.

This never-fail trick which Sima Lin had just executed had actually been defeated, as though by ghosts or demons. Pointing towards Wang Yuyan, he cried out, "You aren't a human, you're a ghost, a ghost!"

All the teeth in elder Meng's mouth had been knocked loose, and he had actually swallowed three of his teeth earlier. Although he was very old, he was very sharp-eyed, his hair was still dark, and his teeth were firm and hard. He prided himself on these things. Whenever he lost a tooth, he grieved deeply. Now, he loudly cried out in an indistinct voice, "Capture that girl, capture that girl!"

The rules of the Qingcheng sect were extremely rigid. Although elder Meng had a very high status, all actions had to be approved by the sect-leader first. Every disciple turned their gaze towards Sima Lin. If he said a single word of approval, they would throw themselves at Wang Yuyan.

Sima Lin said icily, "Miss Wang, how is it that you are so very familiar with the martial arts of our sect?" Wang Yuyan said, "I read them in a book. The techniques of the Qingcheng sect specialize in trickery, deception, viciousness, and ruthlessness. There aren't a lot of changes or transformations in the techniques. They aren't too hard to memorize." Sima Lin said, "What book is this?" Wang Yuyan said, "Oh, it wasn't a particularly special book. There are two volumes of the tome which discusses the martial arts of the Qingcheng sect. The first volume is called <<Nine Strikes of the 'Qing' Character>>. The second is called, <<Eighteen Destroying Strokes of the 'Cheng' Character>>. You are the sect-leader of the Qingcheng sect. Naturally, you've read them both."

Sima Lin secretly cried, "How embarrassing!" When he was young and first starting to learn martial arts, his father said to him, "In our schools martial arts, there originally were the <<Nine Strikes of the 'Qing' Character>> and the <<Eighteen Destroying Strokes of the 'Cheng' Character>>. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, they were lost, leaving us with incomplete fragments, so that all these years, we have not been able to surpass the Penglai sect, and causing us to only be able to stalemate them. If anyone is able to uncover these two sets of martial arts in their entirety, not only would we be able to destroy the Penglai sect with ease, it wouldn't be unthinkable for us to rule over the world." Now, hearing her say that she read these books, he couldn't help but feel a fire ignite in his chest. He said, "Might you be willing to lend this book to me to read, so that I might see what similarities this book has with the teachings of my sect?"

Before Wang Yuyan had a chance to reply, Yao Bodang began to laugh loudly. "Miss, don't fall for this kid's trick. His understanding of the martial arts of the Qingcheng sect is very shallow. He only knows three or four of the strikes of the 'Qing' character, and at most eleven or twelve of the 'Cheng'

character's destroying strokes. He wants to trick you into letting him check out your strange and wondrous martial arts treatises. No matter what, you can't lend it to him!"

Sima Lin's intentions were laid bare by Yao Bodang. Sinister lines of anger appeared on his young face. He said, "I personally wish to borrow some books from Miss Wang. What does this have to do with your Qin family?"

Yao Bodang laughed. "Naturally, this affects the Qin family stronghold. Miss Wang has memorized so many strange and exotic martial arts in the world. Whoever gets her will become matchless in the world. When I, Yao Bodang, see gold, silver, pearls, treasure, or beautiful women, I've always stretched my hand out and taken them. How can it be that I'll let such a rare, once-in-a-lifetime treasure such as Miss Wang slip away from my grasp? Brother Sima, if your Qingcheng sect wishes to borrow books from her, why don't you come and ask me if I am willing to allow it? Hah hah, hah hah! Why don't you take a guess? Do you think I will agree?"

These words Yao Bodang spoke were extremely rude and arrogant, but after Sima Lin and the two elders heard them, their hearts were swayed. They thought to themselves, "This young girl's understanding of martial arts truly is boundless and unfathomable. Judging from her fragile, delicate appearance, it'd be impossible for her to personally fight and achieve victory. But she obviously has read many weird and remarkable martial arts manuals, and has understood how to apply what she has learned as well. If we can manage to take her back to the Qingcheng sect, we would be able to learn more than just the 'Nine Strikes of the 'Qing' Character' and the 'Eighteen Destroying Strokes of the 'Cheng' Character'. It seems as though Stronghold-master Yao has the same thought. Looks like we need to prepare for a major battle."

Yao Bodang continued, "Miss Wang, we originally came to cause trouble for the Murong family. From the looks of it, you

seem to belong to the Murong family?"

Once Wang Yuyan heard the words, 'you seem to belong to the Murong family', she felt both bashful and happy. Her entire face blushed, and she swayed once before saying, "Young Master Murong is my cousin. What business do you have with him? How has he offended you?"

Yao Bodang laughed loudly. "You are Murong Fu's cousin? That couldn't be better. The ancestor's of Gusu's Murong family owes my Yao family a million taels of gold and ten million taels of silver. It's been centuries, and they owe us interest on the interest. How shall we settle this debt?" Wang Yuyan was astonished. "How can there be such a thing? My uncle's family has always been rich. How can they owe your family money?" Yao Bodang replied, "Whether they owe us or not, what does a little girl like you know? I went looking for Murong Bo to get our money back. He agreed to pay us back, but he didn't pay us back a single copper before his feet stiffened and he dropped dead. Since the old fellow died, the only option is to go find his son. Who would have imagined that upon his creditors arriving, Murong Fu would actually hide himself away? The only choice I have is to find something to serve as a mortgage."

Wang Yuyan replied, "My cousin is generous and straightforward. If he borrowed money from you, he would have repaid you long ago. Even if he didn't borrow money from you, if you asked him for some gold and silver, he would not refuse you. What is this nonsense about him being afraid of you and hiding himself away?"

Yao Bodang wrinkled his forehead. He said, "How about this. It's hard to fully debate matters like this in a short period of time. Tonight, why don't you temporarily come north with me, Miss? You can stay at the Qin family stronghold for a year or so. I guarantee that the people of the Qin family stronghold won't touch a hair on your head. The wife of Yao Bodang is famous for being a jealous old tigress. I've always been extremely well-disciplined when it

comes to dealing with other women. Put your mind at rest. There's no need for you to pack either, we'll leave immediately. After your cousin has coughed up the money to repay this debt, I will naturally escort you back to Gusu and allow you and your cousin to be married. The Qin family stronghold will give you a very lavish wedding gift, and I, Yao Bodang, will have to come and drink a wedding toast as well." As he spoke, his lips split into another loud laugh.

These words were extremely boorish, and the last few words were all the more mocking, but in Wang Yuyan's ears, they sounded very sweet and made her very happy. Smiling, she said, "You love to talk rubbish. Why would I go with you to the Qin family stronghold? If my uncle's family really borrowed money from you, most likely it was something which happened a long time ago which my cousin doesn't know about. All you have to do is produce evidence, and my cousin will definitely repay you."

Yao Bodang's original intention was to carry off Wang Yuyan and force her to reveal martial arts secrets. Everything he said earlier about a million taels of gold and ten million taels of silver were all nonsense. Now, hearing how innocent she was in taking his nonsensical story to be true, he said, "It is best if you come with me. The Qin family stronghold is a very fun place. We've raised a pack of black hunting panthers, giant hawks, and deer. Everything is new and exciting. I guarantee that you won't be bored of the place within half a year. As soon as your cousin receives the news, he will immediately come there to find you. Even if he doesn't pay me back, I guess I can just forget about it and let the two of you go back to Gusu. What do you think?" These words he spoke caused Wang Yuyan's heart to actually be moved.

Sima Lin, seeing her gaze wander and a beaming expression on her face, thought to himself, "If she actually agrees to go to the Qin family stronghold, it wouldn't be appropriate for me to prevent her from doing so afterwards."

Without waiting for her to respond, he immediately interjected, "Yunnan is a place of bitter cold, located beyond the Great Wall. Miss Wang, how could a delicate and tender Jiangnan beauty such as you suffer such torment? My hometown of Chengdu is a city of legendary beauty, known as the City of Silk and Satin. The silk which we produce is famous world-wide. Moreover, we have beautiful scenery and ten times as many diverting things to do as Yunnan. Miss Wang, in accordance with your beauty, you should come to Chengdu and buy some silk dresses. It would be like a red rose on a field of green plants, each multiplying the beauty of the other. Young Master Murong is both handsome and talented. Naturally, he would like it if you dressed up beautifully for him." Since he was now certain that his father had been harmed by the people from the Penglai sect, he held no more grudges against the Murong family.

Yao Bodang shouted, "Farting, farting, your dog of a mother is letting out a smelly fart! Can it be that the city of Suzhou lacks silks or brocade? Open your dog eyes and take a close look at these three beautiful girls. Which of them don't know how to dress up?" Sima Lin let out a cold snort. "It stinks in here. It really does stink." Yao Bodang angrily shouted, "Are you talking about me?" Sima Lin said, "I wouldn't dare! I'm saying that a filthy dog naturally lets out nauseating farts."

With a swishing sound, Yao Bodang drew the short-hilted broadsword from his and called out, "Sima Lin, my Qin family stronghold, compared to your Qingcheng sect, is probably about on par and matched with each other. But if the Qin family stronghold unites with the Penglai sect, we'd probably be able to wipe out your Qingcheng sect. Am I right?"

The look on Sima Lin's face changed. He thought to himself, "His words are not false. After the passing of my father, the strength of my Qingcheng sect is already diminished. In addition, this traitor, Zhu Baokun, has stolen

our secret martial arts techniques. If the Qin family stronghold becomes our enemies as well, then things will become very difficult. As the saying goes, 'he who strikes first becomes the master, he who strikes second suffers disaster'. Goddamnit, the only option we have today is to launch a surprise attack on them." He immediately said lightly, "What do you propose?"

Seeing him fold his hands into his sleeves, Yao Bodang knew that he could shoot forth his insidious hidden weapons at any point in time. Instantly, he became all the more cautious. He said, "I am inviting Miss Wang to stay in Yunnan as my guest until Young Master Murong comes to escort her back home. But you have chosen to meddle in my business and refuse to accept this. Am I right?"

Sima Lin said, "Your home, Yunnan, is too crappy a place for Miss Wang. I want to invite Miss Wang to come to Chengdu to enjoy herself." Yao Bodang said, "Fine. Let us determine victory or defeat through battle. Whoever wins will be Miss Wang's host." Sima Lin said, "Precisely so. After all, even if the losers want to be Miss Wang's host, they can't possibly invite her down to the underworld." The meaning of his words was that this wasn't a competition of martial arts, but a life-and-death struggle which would determine who would live and who would be destroyed. Yao Bodang loudly laughed, then shouted, "The life that I, Yao Bodang have lived, has always been one of lapping blood from the tip of my broadsword. Sect-leader Sima, you want to use the word 'death' to frighten me? I have not taken it to heart in the slightest!" Sima Lin said, "How shall we compete? Shall the two of us duel with each other, or shall everyone just charge at the other side?"

Yao Bodang said, "Why don't you just let this old fellow that I am play with you a bit..." Sima Lin suddenly turned his head towards the left, a look of utmost astonishment on his face, as though something bizarre had just happened. Yao Bodang's gaze had been on him this entire time, fearing that

he was planning some sort of trick. But now, he couldn't help but turn his gaze to the left as well. Suddenly, three sneering sounds could be heard. Snapping his attention back, he saw that the hidden weapons were now less than a meter away from his chest. He felt sourness in his heart, knowing that he was in deep trouble....

Just at this critical, lethal moment, something flashed by his chest. With a clattering sound, it knocked aside all of the poisoned nails. The poison nails were shot out extremely quickly, and despite Yao Bodang being focused upon his opponent, he still would have been unable to avoid them. But the object which knocked aside the poison nails was several times faster than the nails. It was sent out later, but arrived earlier, knocking the poisoned nails aside. As to what exactly was tossed out, no one had seen clearly.

Wang Yuyan cried out in a happy voice, "Is it Uncle Bao who's arrived?"

An extremely strange voice replied, "Tis not so, tis not so. It isn't Uncle Bao who's arrived."

Wang Yuyan laughed, "You claim not to be Uncle Bao? Even before you yourself appear, your 'tis not so, tis not so' comments arrive!" That voice replied, "Tis not so, tis not so! I am not Uncle Bao!" Wang Yuyan laughed. "Tis not so, tis not so? Then who are you?" That voice replied, "The kinsmen of the Murong family call me 'third brother', but you addressed me as me 'uncle'. Tis not so, tis not so! You addressed me incorrectly!" Wang Yuyan's body swayed with laughter as she pressed her hands to her face. "You still aren't coming out?"

The voice did not reply. After a while, Wang Yuyan saw that there wasn't a single bit of movement, and cried out, "Hey, come out! Come help us shoo out these random people away!" But still, no sound could be heard. Clearly, the person surnamed Bao had left long ago. Wang Yuyan felt a bit disappointed, and asked Ah Zhu, "Where did he go?" Ah Zhu smiled. "Third Brother Bao always had this sort of

weird temper. Earlier, Miss, you said, 'You still aren't coming out?' Originally, he was planning to come out, but after hearing you say that, he would do the opposite to make things awkward for you. I'm afraid he might not come back at all today."

Earlier, there was a ninety nine percent chance of death for Yao Bodang, if it hadn't been for the help of the man surnamed Bao. Naturally, he felt indebted to him. Originally, he held no grudges against the Qingcheng sect and felt no enmity towards them, but now, it was unavoidable that he would want to kill Sima Lin. Brandishing his short-handled broadsword, he shouted, "Shameless scoundrel! You secretly shoot out hidden weapons. Do you think you can hurt this old man with them?" With a sweep of his broadsword, he chopped towards the crown of Sima Lin's head. Sima Lin's hands left his sleeves. In his left hand he wielded a steel awl, and in his right hand he wielded a steel mace, and his two weapons began to tussle against Yao Bodang's broadsword.

Yao Bodang possessed great physical strength, and his sabre techniques were ruthless and vicious. By contrast, Sima Lin specialized in using small, quick weapons and clever techniques. This was the first time a member of the Qin family stronghold and a member of Qingcheng sect had fought against each other. With each of them being the leader of their respective organization, this was more than just a life-and-death battle; this was something which would determine the prestige or downfall of their sects. Both of them were forced to be very careful, not daring to slacken off in the slightest.

After seventy or so stances had been exchanged, Wang Yuyan suddenly said to Ah Zhu, "Check it out. It seems as though the Qin family stronghold is missing more than just five strokes from their 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' sabre style. Why isn't leader Yao using the techniques 'Carrying the Son Through the River' or 'Valuing Integrity, Guarding Righteousness'?" Ah Zhu didn't know anything about the

'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' sabre style, and found it difficult to respond.

In the middle of this fierce battle, these four sentences drifted into Yao Bodang's ears. He was greatly shocked. "This little lady's eyesight is incredible. It originally was the case that only fifty nine strokes remained of the sixty four strokes of the 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' sabre style. But when my master learned this style, he was not intelligent enough to learn those two stances, 'Carrying the Son Through the River' and 'Valuing Integrity, Guarding Righteousness.' Thus, those two stances were lost, leaving behind only fifty seven strokes. In order to save face, I slightly modified the alternate forms of two other strokes, so as to keep the number of stances at fifty nine. She actually saw through it."

As it were, the people of the mountain strongholds were a motley, disorderly array. Anyone could mingle together with them, but when Yunnan's Qin family led raids to loot and plunder, the leaders were always disciples of the 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' school. The experts of other sects, knowing that the members of the Qin family stockade would not treat them as one of their own, would not go and try to join forces with them. Yao Bodang's master came from the Qin family. He was not only the chief of the Qin family stockade, but also the leader of the sect-leader of the 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' school of martial arts. His own martial arts level, as well as that of his son, Qin Boqi, was very mediocre. Thus, he gave his own rank and station to that of his head apprentice, Yao Bodang. Several months ago, while in Shaanxi, Qin Boqi was killed by a sabre technique which utilized three horizontal chops and a vertical chop, known as the "Four Knife-Stroke of the 'Wang' Character" [The 'Wang' character, meaning 'King', is written in Chinese with three parallel horizontal strokes and a vertical stroke which bisects all three]. This was the hardest and most fierce technique within the 'Five Tigers Shattering the Gate' sabre style. Everyone believed that the

killer must have been Gusu's Murong family. Yao Bodang, remembering his master's benevolence, marshaled the many experts of his stronghold and came to Suzhou to seek revenge on behalf of his martial-brother. Unexpectedly, he almost lost his life to the poison nails of the Qingcheng sect before he even had a chance to meet with the master of the place, and his life was actually rescued by one of Murong Fu's friends.

Yao Bodang hated Sima Lin's vile, treacherous techniques. Now, hearing Wang Yuyan expose the flaws in his martial arts, he felt very ashamed. He wanted to defeat Sima Lin as quickly as possible, so as to maintain his own dignity and prestige within his sect. But this anxiousness to achieve a quick victory made him rash and impatient. He executed several risky attacks, all of which were dodged by Sima Lin. Letting out a loud roar, Yao Bodang brandished his sabre in a mighty downwards chop. Just as Sima Lin leapt to the left, Yao Bodang suddenly kicked out with his right leg. Sima Lin's body was in midair, leaving him with no place to dodge. Instead, he delivered a powerful thrust towards Yao Bodang's foot using the steel awl in his left hand, intending to force Yao Bodang to retract this kick. Although Yao Bodang indeed did not follow through with his right kick, his left leg suddenly struck out as well in a tandem strike, attacking the left side of Sima Lin's waist.

Sima Lin struck diagonally with his steel mace. With a clapping sound, by chance it managed to strike Yao Bodang precisely on the bridge of his nose. Blood immediately began to flow from the wound. But at the same time, Yao Bodang's left leg struck Sima Lin on his waist.

Unfortunately, since Yao Bodang was struck first, he was startled, causing the power of this kick to have less than twenty percent of his normal force. Although Sima Lin was hit, he suffered no ill effects at all, aside from some temporary pain. And so, in the twinkling of an eye, victory and defeat had been determined. Letting out a tiger's roar,

Yao Bodang charged forward with his sabre. But feeling pain so severe that it seemed his head had been split in twain, Yao Bodang's footsteps became staggered and his footing became unsure.

Sima Lin's winning of this battle was highly due to luck. He knew that if he spared Yao Bodang's life, Yao Bodang would cause him no end of trouble in the future. Immediately, he made up his mind to be ruthless. The mace in his hand flashed through the air in an attack. Just as Yao Bodang brandished his knife to defend, the steel awl in Sima Lin's left hand pierced directly towards Yao Bodang's heart.

The deputy-leader of the Qin family stronghold, seeing that things were going south, let out a loud cry then threw his short-hilted broadsword directly towards Sima Lin. In the blink of an eye, the room was filled with the sound of wind blowing as over ten short-hilted broadswords flew through the air towards Sima Lin.

As it so happened, within the martial arts of the Qin family stronghold, there was a consummate technique which involved throwing their broadswords at an opponent. Each broadsword weighed roughly between three and five kilograms. When thrown at an opponent, they carried an extremely powerful force. Now, with over ten broadswords flying towards him, Sima Lin found himself in a hopeless situation, neither able to deflect them nor able to dodge them.

Just when it seemed as though he was about to fall prey to the flying broadswords, a shadow of a man appeared in the room, flying towards Sima Lin's side. Stretching out his hands, the shadow plunged them into the midst of those flying broadswords, snatching and grabbing at them until he had seized all of them. He clasped them to his chest with his left hand, then let out a long laugh, seating himself on a chair in the middle of the room. Following this, he hurled all of the broadswords down to his feet with a clanking sound.

Everyone was struck dumb with astonishment. The man seated in the chair was middle-aged, thin and gaunt, extremely tall, and wore a long, grey gown. There was a stubborn, perverse look to his features. Having seen his skill in seizing the broadswords, everyone here was both fearful and awed. Nobody dared to say a word.

Only Duan Yu was laughing. "This brother's movements are really quick! I imagine your martial arts is at a very high level. Sir, might I ask what your undoubtedly famous name is?"

Before that man had a chance to reply, Wang Yuyan rushed forward and laughed, "Third Brother Bao! I thought you weren't going to come back, and was starting to worry. Wonderful, wonderful!"

Duan Yu said, "Oh, so it's Mr. Bao." Mr. Bao tossed him a sideways glance, then icily said, "Boy, who are you? How dare you prattle on and on in front of me?" Duan Yu replied, "My name is Duan Yu. I've never studied martial arts and am not a warrior, but during my time stumbling about the jianghu, I've somehow managed to avoid death up 'til now. It's really rather remarkable." Mr. Bao turned and stared at him, not knowing how to respond.

Sima Lin stepped forward. Bowing deeply, he said, "Sima Lin of the Qingcheng sect greatly appreciates your assistance. I will never dare to forget your great benevolence and kindness. Mr. Bao, might I ask what your full name is, so that I might forever remember it in my heart?" Mr. Bao's eyes flashed, and he suddenly struck out with a kick, knocking Sima Lin backwards into a somersault. He shouted, "You think you are worthy of knowing my name? I didn't have any intention to save you. It's just that this is the home of Sister Ah Zhu. If they dismembered you, you little brat, into many pieces here, it would've dirtied this place, the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds.' **** off, **** off now!"

When Sima Lin saw him kick out, he wanted to dodge, but could not do so in time. The fall he took was very humiliating. After hearing Mr. Bao speak such bullying words, according to the rules of the jianghu, if Sima Lin didn't immediately attack and go all out, he would at least have to arrange a future date for a duel. No matter what, he could not allow himself to be humiliated so badly in front of everyone without even a response. He gathered himself, then said, "Mr. Bao, today I, Sima Lin, was besieged by many enemies and almost lost my life. I am indebted to you for your saving of my life. I, Sima Lin, am a person who can distinguish between benevolence and enmity. I will repay benevolence with benevolence, and enmity with vengeance. Please, sir! Your move." Sima Lin knew all too well that no matter how long or how arduously he trained, he wouldn't be able to achieve Mr. Bao's level of martial arts. Thus, he could only use the eight words, 'repay benevolence with benevolence, and enmity with vengeance', to indistinctly put up a muddled response.

Mr. Bao wasn't even paying attention to what he was saying. He turned towards Wang Yuyan and said, "Miss Wang, how is it that the madame allowed you to come here?" Wang Yuyan laughed, "Why don't you guess how this happened?" Mr. Bao mumbled to himself, "This is a bit hard to guess."

Sima Lin, seeing how Mr. Bao totally ignored his display in favor of talking to Wang Yuyan, felt even more belittled and humiliated than when he had been kicked earlier. He couldn't help but feel hatred towards Mr. Bao. He no longer cared at all about the benevolence which Mr. Bao had shown him earlier. With a wave of his left hand, he led all the disciples of the Qingcheng sect away.

Mr. Bao said, "Hold. Stay here and listen to my instructions." Sima Lin turned around. "What?" Mr. Bao said, "I heard that you came to Gusu in order to avenge the death of your father. You came looking for the wrong person. Your

father, Sima Wei, was not killed by Young Master Murong.” Sima Lin said, “Why do you say that? Mr. Bao, how do you know this?”

Mr. Bao angrily replied, “If I say that Young Master Murong didn’t kill him, then naturally Young Master Murong didn’t kill him. Even if he really killed him, if I say he didn’t, then the killing doesn’t count. Can it be that my words hold no weight?”

Sima Lin thought to himself, “These words of his are really far too peremptory.” He replied, “I cannot exist in the same world with a man who murdered my father. Although my skill in martial arts is low, I must avenge his death, even if it results in my body being smashed into powder. Mr. Bao, if you know who murdered him, please inform me.” Mr. Bao loudly laughed. “Your father isn’t my son. Why should I know or care as to who killed him? I’m telling you that Young Master Murong didn’t kill him, but it seems you won’t believe me. Fine! Let’s just say I killed him. If you want to avenge him, come kill me!” Sima Lin’s face turned ashen pale. “How can the murder of my father be treated as a game? Mr. Bao, I know that I am not your match. If you want to kill me, go ahead, but you are not allowed to humiliate me thusly!” Mr. Bao laughed, “I refuse to kill you, but insist on humiliating you. What are you going to do about it?”

Sima Lin was so furious, his chest was about to explode. However, he still did not have the courage to rush forward and stake his life in an all-out-attack. He was caught between a rock and a hard place, with neither advancing nor retreating being a good option. He felt extremely awkward.

Mr. Bao laughed, “Your father’s level of martial arts is too trifling. Why would Brother Murong bother to personally deal with him? Young Master Murong’s level of martial arts is ten times higher than mine. Think about it. Is your father fit to die underneath his hands?”

Before Sima Lin had a chance to respond, Zhu Baokun drew out his weapons then loudly shouted, "Mr. Bao, Mr. Sima Wei was my instructor and master. I will not allow you to besmirch his reputation, after his death!" Mr. Bao laughed, "You are a spy who snuck into the Qingcheng sect to steal their martial arts secrets. What does this have to do with you?" Zhu Baokun loudly shouted, "Master Sima Wei treated me with the utmost kindness and decency. I, Zhu Baokun, am ashamed that I was not able to repay him. Today, in dying to protect my departed master's reputation, I will slightly atone for my sins of deceiving him! Mr. Bao, apologize immediately to Sect-master Sima Wei!"

Mr. Bao laughed. "I, Bao the Third, have never admitted to making any mistakes in my life, and have never apologized. Even when I know I am in the wrong, I'll argue and debate until my dying breath. Even when he was alive, Sima Wei didn't have much of a reputation. Now that he's dead, his reputation is even worse. This sort of person should have been killed long ago! It's great that he was killed! Great!"

Zhu Baokun angrily roared, "Draw your weapons!"

Mr. Bao laughed, "Sima Wei's son and disciples are a bunch of worthless trash. Aside from using hidden weapons to harm others, what else are they good for?"

Zhu Baokun shouted, "On guard!" He struck out with the technique, "Ascending to Heaven, Descending Past Hell", a simultaneous attack using both the steel awl in his left hand and the steel mace in his right.

Mr. Bao didn't even leave the chair. He waved the sleeve of his left arm, and a powerful gust of wind struck outwards. As Zhu Baokun hurriedly dodged, Mr. Bao kicked with his right leg, sending Zhu Baokun collapsing to the floor. Mr. Bao kicked out again with his right leg, striking him directly on the buttocks and knocking him out of the room.

Zhu Baokun flew through the air, landing on his shoulder

and his head. He immediately flipped to his feet, then hobbled and staggered towards Mr. Bao, once more stabbing at Mr. Bao's chest with the steel awl. Mr. Bao seized him by the wrist. With burst of force, he threw him up into the air. With a crashing sound, Zhu Baokun slammed into the ceiling. Falling to the floor, Zhu Baokun flipped to his feet, then rushed towards Mr. Bao a third time. Frowning, Mr. Bao said, "You really don't know what's good for you. What, you think I won't kill you?" Zhu Baokun cried out, "It's best if you killed me..."

Mr. Bao struck out with both arms, capturing both of Zhu Baokun's hands. With a cracking sound, he shattered both of Zhu Baokun's arms, also causing Zhu Baokun's awl to pierce into his own left side, while his mace hit his right shoulder. Blood immediately began to flow from his new wounds. These wounds he sustained were grievous. Although he still wanted to fight, he no longer had the ability to.

Everyone in the Qingcheng sect stared at each other, uncertain as to whether or not they should go forward and assist. Most of their hatred towards him had dissipated upon seeing Zhu Baokun truly be willing to sacrifice his own life in order to protect his master's reputation.

This entire time, Ah Zhu was silently watching from the sidelines. Now, she suddenly said, "Master Sima, Master Zhu, if Gusu's Murong family truly did kill Sima Wei, how could we leave the rest of you alive? If Third Brother Bao truly wanted to exterminate all of you, I'm afraid it wouldn't be too hard for him to accomplish. At the very least, he wouldn't have saved master Sima's life, and Miss Wang wouldn't have tried so hard to help master Zhu. I suggest that all of you go back home and launch a careful investigation as to who really killed Mr. Sima."

Sima Lin felt that these words were extremely reasonable. He wanted to say a few words in response, but Mr. Bao angrily said, "These is Sister Ah Zhu's place. The hostess has asked you to leave this place. Why haven't you scrambled

yet?!" Sima Lin replied, "Fine! We'll meet again someday." With a slight nod, he left. Zhu Baokun and the others followed him out.

Yao Bodang saw that Mr. Bao's martial arts was very high, and that he had a very weird temperament. He very much wanted to make the acquaintance of this incredible wulin figure, and also wanted to convince Wang Yuyan to divulge more martial arts secrets to him. He immediately rose to his feet and was about to speak, when Mr. Bao loudly said, "Yao Bodang, I'm telling you right now that your worthless martial-brother, Qin Boqi, wouldn't be worthy of being chopped at a single time by Young Master Murong, even if he practiced martial arts for thirty more years. And even if he practiced for one or two hundred years, Young Master Murong would disdain chopping at him four times. I won't allow you to say a single word more. Roll the **** out, now!" Shocked, Yao Bodang's face turned ghastly pale. He tightly gripped the hilt of his broadsword. Mr. Bao said, "Your level of martial arts is way too pitiful. Don't display your meager skills in front of me. If I tell you to roll the **** out, you should roll the **** out. There's no room for you to say anything else."

Earlier, the bandits of the Qin family stronghold had thrown their broadswords towards Sima Lin. These broadswords were intercepted by Mr. Bao, and were now piled around his feet. As they watched him humiliate Yao Bodang, all of them wanted to attack and kill him. But unarmed and without their weapons, they were like toothless, fangless tigers.

Mr. Bao let out a loud laugh, then struck out with a series of kicks. Each kick landed on the handle of a broadsword, sending all of the ten-plus broadswords slowly flying towards the bandits of the Qin family stronghold. Each of them caught the broadswords, but as they did so, they were shocked. It had been extremely easy for them to catch their weapons. Clearly, Mr. Bao was intentionally returning their

weapons to them. They couldn't help but realize that for Mr. Bao to make it so easy for them to catch their weapons, he could have easily made it extremely difficult for them to do so as well. It wouldn't have been hard at all for him to spin the broadswords around and pierce their bodies with them. Each of them wielded their weapons in their hands, but all of them looked extremely miserable.

Mr. Bao said, "Yao Bodang, are you going to roll the **** out or not?" Yao Bodang laughed bitterly. "Mr. Bao, you have saved my life today. The only reason I am alive is because of your kindness. If you have any orders for me, I will carry them out. I bid you farewell." As he spoke, he bowed politely, then waved with his left hand. "Everyone, let's go!"

Mr. Bao said, "I told you to roll the **** out, not walk out!" Yao Bodang was stunned. "I don't understand what you mean." Mr. Bao said, "Rolling means you roll. Are you going to roll or not?" Yao Bodang thought to himself that this person was extremely strange, clearly insane and unwilling to listen to reason. Paying no more attention to him, he hurriedly walked towards the main doorway.

Mr. Bao shouted, "Tis not so, tis not so! This is striding, this is jogging, this is walking, this is running. No matter how you spin it, it isn't rolling!" With a flicker of his shadow, he appeared behind Yao Bodang. His left hand flashed out, seizing Yao Bodang by the back of his neck. Yao Bodang tried to defend with his right elbow, but Mr. Bao lifted him up with his left hand, raising him above the floor. Thus, Yao Bodang's right elbow missed him.

Next, Mr. Bao stretched out his right hand, grabbing Yao Bodang by the buttocks. He loudly shouted, "This is the home of my sister, Ah Zhu! It's not the type of place where you can come and go as you please! Roll your mother****in' *** out!" His hands loosened, rolling Yao Bodang's huge form out of the building with a throwing motion.

Yao Bodang's acupoints had been sealed by him, rendering Yao Bodang unable to stand up. All he could do

was helplessly roll on the floor like a giant log until his body exited the building. Fortunately, the doorway was very wide and his head did not collide with anything. The bandits of the Qin family let out a cry of alarm, and rushed out afterwards in unison, stopping his roll. Yao Bodang said, "Quick, let's go, let's go!" All of them ran away as though a swarm of bees were after them.

Mr. Bao looked at Duan Yu up and down, but wasn't able to figure out what sort of fellow he was. He asked Wang Yuyan, "What type of person is he? Should I roll him out too?"

Wang Yuyan said, "Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, and I were seized by Granny Yan and were in an extremely dangerous situation. It was our great fortune that Young Gentleman Duan rescued us. In addition, he knows the circumstances of how Elder Xuanbei was killed by someone using a blow from the 'Veda Sceptre' technique. We can ask him about it." Mr. Bao said, "So what you're saying is that you'd like for him to stay?" Wang Yuyan said, "Correct." Mr. Bao grinned. "You aren't afraid that Brother Murong will drink vinegar?" [Drinking vinegar means getting jealous] Wang Yuyan's eyes widened. "What do you mean, drink vinegar?" Mr. Bao pointed towards Duan Yu. "This fellow is glib and sly. Don't fall for his tricks!" Wang Yuyan still didn't understand. "What tricks did I fall for? Are you saying he'll make up false stories about Shaolin? I don't think that's the case."

Seeing how innocent and naïve she was, Mr. Bao felt it was inappropriate to say anything else. He let out three cold snickers towards Duan Yu, then said, "I heard that monk Xuanbei was killed in Dali by someone using a blow from the 'Veda Sceptre' technique, and that a bunch of stupid *****s are claiming someone from our Murong family did this. What exactly is going on? Tell me the truth." Duan Yu felt very unhappy. He coldly replied, "What do you think you're doing, interrogating a prisoner? If I don't tell you, what will you do, beat me up?" Mr. Bao was startled, but

instead of being angry, he laughed while mumbling repeatedly, "Bold youngster, bold youngster!" He suddenly walked forwards, then seized Duan Yu by his upper arm. He need to only use the slightest bit of force for Duan Yu to feel pain deep within his bones. Duan Yu loudly cried out, "Hey, what are you doing?"

Mr. Bao replied, "I am interrogating a prisoner and cruelly beating him!" Duan Yu let him do what he want, pretending as though the arm no longer belonged to him. Smiling, Duan Yu said, "Go ahead and beat me up. I won't pay attention to you." Mr. Bao added more force to his grip, causing Duan Yu's bones to groan in protest, as though they were about to snap. Duan Yu expended enormous effort to resist the pain, continuing to ignore him.

Ah Bi hurriedly said, "Third Brother, this young gentleman is extremely stubborn and has an extremely haughty temper when roused. He is our savior and benefactor. Don't hurt him." Mr. Bao nodded. "Wonderful, wonderful. Stubborn and has a haughty temper, eh? That's a very appealing trait to me, Mr. 'Tis not so, tis not so!" As he spoke, he slowly released Duan Yu's arm.

Ah Zhu laughed. "Speaking of appealing, everyone must be hungry. Old Gu! Old Gu!" Raising her voice, she shouted. Old Gu stuck his head in from a side door. Seeing that Yao Bodang, Sima Lin, and the others had left, he was overjoyed and happily skipped inside. Ah Zhu said, "First, go brush your teeth twice, wash your face twice, then wash your hands three times. Lastly, prepare a few exquisite dishes for us. If they're even slightly dirty, Mr. Bao will make things rough for you!" Old Gu grinned. "I guarantee they'll be clean. I guarantee it!"

The servants of the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds' prepared a banquet for them within a flowery pavilion. Ah Zhu arranged for Mr. Bao to take the head seat, with Duan Yu seated next to him and Wang Yuyan taking the third seat. Ah Zhu and Ah Bi took the seats on the right

hand side, accompanying them. Not waiting for the tea to be served, Wang Yuyan said, "Third Brother, he...he..."

Mr. Bao tossed a glance at Duan Yu, then said, "Miss Wang, there's an outsider seated here. There are some things we cannot talk about. Moreover, the fellow here is a sly, glib, pretty-faced playboy. I don't trust him at all..."

Duan Yu's temper rose as he listened. He suddenly rose to his feet, intending to immediately leave.

Ah Bi hurriedly said, "Young Gentleman Duan, don't be angry. Mr. Bao always has had this sort of attitude. His formal name is Bao Butong [Butong means different, or contrary]. He insists on arguing or offending people for a bit. Only then can he swallow his food. The day he doesn't offend people with his words is the day the sun rises from the west. Please sit."

Duan Yu glanced at Wang Yuyan. It seemed to him as though she wanted him to sit as well. Although he couldn't be certain of it, in the end, he wasn't willing to give up the chance to enjoy a banquet with her. He once more sat down, then said, "Mr. Bao says that I am a pretty-faced playboy, and that I thus am very untrustworthy. I imagine, then, that your Young Master Murong's appearance is similar to that of Mr. Bao's?"

Bao Butong laughed loudly. "Excellent question! Our young master is much more handsome than you, brother Duan..." Wang Yuyan, hearing these words, immediately broke out into a radiant smile which seemed to come from the depths of her heart. Bao Butong continued, "Our young master has a vigorous, heroic spirit to his appearance. Although he is very handsome, it's totally different from your useless pretty-face, brother Duan. Totally different! As for my humble self, I am heroic but not handsome. I have an average degree of heroism and vitality, but an extraordinary amount of ugliness. Thus, I can be described as an ugly hero." Duan Yu and the others all broke out into laughter.

After drinking a cup of wine, Bao Butong said, "The young master sent me to Fujian to handle some business. He wanted me to secretly help Shaolin out in an important matter. As to what that matter is, we'll have to wait until brother Duan leaves before I can tell you. Since we are trying to become friends with the Shaolin sect, there is no way that we would kill one of their monks. In addition, the young master has never been to Dali. Although Gusu's Murong family is very powerful, I'm afraid we haven't yet mastered the ability to strike a person from thousands of miles away using the blows of the 'Veda Sceptre' technique."

Duan Yu nodded. "Brother Bao's words are very reasonable."

Bao Butong shook his head. "Tis not so, tis not so!" Duan Yu was startled. He thought to himself, "I said your words are reasonable. Why would you disagree?" Bao Butong said, "It's not that my words are reasonable. This is just how the truth of the matter is. Brother Duan, when you say that my words are reasonable, you leave open the implication that I am simply good at talking, and things aren't actually the way I say they are. Thus, these words of yours are really incorrect!" Smiling, Duan Yu did not reply, deciding there was no need to argue with him.

Bao Butong said, "Yesterday, I returned to Suzhou. I ran across Fourth Brother Feng, and the two of us pondered over the situation for a bit. It must be that some son of a turtle has a grudge against Gusu's Murong family and is secretly harming others with the intention of having others making out the bill for these crimes to Gusu's Murong family. To tell you the truth, originally, this wasn't a big deal at all. What can be better than a nice big brawl?" Ah Zhu laughed. "Fourth brother must have been exceedingly happy. He can't ask for anything better than a fight!" Bao Butong shook his head. "Tis not so, tis not so! How can you say that he can't

ask for anything better than a fight? He always asks for fights! Wherever he goes, he likes to get into fights!"

Seeing how he rebutted Ah Zhu thusly, only now did Duan Yu believe Ah Bi's earlier words. This person really did take a perverse joy in arguing against others.

Wang Yuyan said, "Did you and Fourth Brother Feng figure anything out? Who is secretly causing trouble for us?" Bao Butong replied, "Number one, it can't be Shaolin. Number two, it can't be the Beggar's Sect. Their Vice-Chief, Ma Dayuan, was killed by someone using the 'Throat Locking Technique'. Ma Dayuan became famous because of his skill in the 'Throat Locking Technique'. It's no big deal for someone to kill Ma Dayuan, but for someone to use the 'Throat Locking Technique' to kill him is clearly trouble for Gusu's Murong family. Duan Yu nodded. Bao Butong said, "Brother Duan, you've been repeatedly nodding. You must be secretly saying to yourself that these words of mine are very reasonable."

Duan Yu replied, "Tis not so, tis not so! First, I only nodded once, and was not repeatedly nodding. Secondly, it's not that your words are reasonable; this is simply how the truth of the matter is."

Bao Butong laughed loudly. "This is the technique known as, 'using an opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.' Do you want to place yourself in service to Gusu's Murong family? What's the meaning behind this? Have you taken a fancy to my little sister, Ah Bi?"

Ah Bi's face immediately turned red. Annoyed, she said, "Third Brother, you're talking wildly again. I haven't offended you." Bao Butong replied, "Tis not so, tis not so. If he's taken a fancy to you, it's because of your gentleness and adorableness. I said those words precisely because you haven't offended me. If you had offended me, I would've reversed it and said that you took a fancy to this pretty boy, but this pretty boy didn't take a fancy to you." Ah Bi was even more embarrassed. Ah Zhu said, "Third Brother, stop

bullying Sister Ah Bi. If you keep on bullying her, then next time I'm going to bully your Liangliang."

Bao Butong laughed loudly. "My daughter's name is Bao Buliang. For you to call her Liangliang is flattering her, not bullying her. Sister Ah Bi, I don't dare bully you anymore." It seemed as though he was actually a bit fearful when others threatened to bully his daughter. [The character 'Liang' means 'beautiful'; thus, her given name, 'Buliang', means 'not beautiful'. Ah Zhu referred to her as 'Liangliang' rather than by her given name, 'Buliang', hence Bao Butong's claim that Ah Zhu was 'flattering' his daughter.]

Turning his head towards Wang Yuyan, he said, "Sooner or later, we'll figure out which son of a turtle is causing problems for us. Fourth Brother Feng also just came back. He was in Jiangxi. I don't know the details of what he was doing too much. We two brothers went to pay a visit to the 'Manor of Blue Clouds'. Brother Deng's wife informed us that she received the news that a large group of experts from the Beggars' Clan had arrived in Jiangnan, most likely to cause us trouble. Fourth brother immediately wanted to go and fight with them. It was tough for her to convince him not to go." Ah Zhu smiled. "She's really talented. She actually managed to restrain fourth brother and convince him not to go fight." Bao Butong said, "Tis not so, tis not so. It's not that she's talented. Rather, her words were very reasonable. She said, 'We need to place primary importance on carrying out the young master's grand mission. We cannot run around cultivating powerful foes.'"

As he said this, Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi all grew solemn as they exchanged a few looks.

Duan Yu pretended not to notice. Extending his chopsticks, he picked up a piece of stir-fried chicken, put it in his mouth, then said, "Old Gu's techniques really aren't that bad, but compared to Sisters Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, he's still a ways off." Ah Bi smiled. "Old Gu is inferior to Ah Zhu, but much superior to me." Bao Butong said, "Tis not so, tis

not so! Each of you have your own strengths.” Ah Zhu laughed. “Third Brother, today your sister wasn’t able to personally go to the kitchen and cook something for you. Next time you come, I’ll make it up to you...”

Just as she was speaking, two clear, melodious sounds of a silver bell being rung could be heard. Bao Butong, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi simultaneously said, “Second brother has sent us a message!” The three of them left the banquet, heading to the eaves of the room. Raising their heads, they saw a white pigeon fly in a circle above them before rushing downwards, coming to a rest on Ah Zhu’s hand. Ah Bi stretched out her hand, untying a small bamboo tube which was tied to the bird’s leg. She removed a scroll from within the tube. Bao Butong snatched it away from her. After skimming through it, he said, “If that’s the case, let’s go now!” He said towards Wang Yuyan, “Hey, are you coming or not?”

Wang Yuyan replied, “Coming where? What’s going on?”

Bao Butong displayed the letter in his hand. He said, “Second brother sent us a message. He said that the Western Xia’s ‘League of Elites’ sent out a large number of experts who have arrived in Jiangnan. We don’t know what their intentions are. He wants me to take Ah Zhu and Ah Bi to go investigate.” Wang Yuyan said, “Naturally, I’ll go with you. Can it be that the Western Xia’s ‘League of Elites’ wants to cause us trouble as well? Our list of enemies is growing larger and larger.” As she spoke, she frowned slightly.

Bao Butong replied, “They aren’t necessarily enemies. However, they definitely haven’t come here for the sake of tourism, and it’s not a religious visit either. It’s been a long time since we’ve met with real experts. Now, both the Beggars’ Clan and the League of Elites are here. Heh heh, now things are getting fun.” As he spoke, a delighted look was on his face, clearly showing his great joy at the possibility of getting into a big fight.

Wang Yuyan walked forwards, intending to take a look at the message. Bao Butong handed it over to her. There were

seven or eight lines of characters on the letter, all written very elegantly and with great vigor. Although she recognized every single character, there was no unity or coherence in the sentences. Although she had read many books, she'd never seen a writing style like this. Frowning, she said, "What's this?"

Ah Zhu smiled. "This is a weird toy which Second Brother Gongye thought up. It's derived from poems and song melodies. Words with the 'flat tone' are read with the 'entering tone', and words with the 'entering tone' are read with the 'falling-rising' tone. 'Yidong' thusly becomes 'Sanjiang'. We're used to reading it and can understand it, but outsiders won't be able to make anything out of it at all."

Ah Bi saw that Wang Yuyan looked a bit uncomfortable after hearing the word, 'outsiders'. She hurriedly said, "Miss Wang, you aren't an outsider! Miss Wang, if you want to learn how to read it, I'll just teach you later." Wang Yuyan immediately looked very happy.

Bao Butong said, "I've long heard that the Western Xia's 'League of Elites' has accumulated a large number of experts. They have people from all over the western regions of China. If Miss Wang comes with us, all you'll need to do is glance at them and you'll know what their origins are. After we handle this matter, we'll go to Henan to meet with the young master."

Wang Yuyan was overjoyed. Clapping, she cried, "Wonderful, wonderful! I'm coming with you!"

Ah Bi said, "Let's take care of business here and go to Henan as fast as we can. We don't want to be late and miss him when he is on the way back. Also, there's that Tibetan monk. I don't know how much damage he's caused over there." Bao Butong said, "Second Brother Gongye's wife has already sent someone to go investigate. That monk already left. Put your heart at ease. Next time, I'll help you beat that monk up." Duan Yu thought to himself, "No matter what he

says, there's no way he can defeat that monk. Forget about beating him up, you should be thanking the heavens if he doesn't beat you up."

Bao Butong said, "I'm just afraid that if Miss Wang comes us, the next time Madame Wang sees me, she'll give me a fierce scolding..." Suddenly, he turned his head towards Duan Yu and said, "You're always here listening! I'm unable to speak freely and comfortable with you here. If you please, beat it. As we're discussing private matters, we don't need your extra set of ears and lips. When we go fight with others, we don't need you to stand by the side and cheer either."

Duan Yu clearly knew that his presence here could only irritate others. Now, seeing as how Bao Butong was openly shooing him off in an extremely impolite way, even though he was reluctant to part with Wang Yuyan, he couldn't be so shameless as to still stay. Rising to his feet, he said, "Miss Wang, Ah Zhu, Ah Bi. I'll take my leave now. May we meet again."

Wang Yuyan said, "It's the middle of the night. Where can you go? Moreover, you aren't familiar with the waterways of Lake Taihu. It's best if you stay here overnight and leave tomorrow."

Duan Yu could tell that although she was inviting him to stay, her attention was elsewhere. Clearly, all she wanted to do was fly as quickly as possible to Young Master Murong's side. He couldn't help but feel both furious and snubbed. He was the son of a royal family, impulsive and stubborn. Although he had undergone many thrilling events and suffered many torments recently, he had never before received such a frosty reception. He immediately replied, "There's not much of a difference between leaving today and tomorrow. I take my leave."

Ah Zhu said, "If that's the case, I'll send someone to escort you out of the lake."

Seeing how even Ah Zhu did not try to convince him to stay, Duan Yu felt all the more unhappy. He thought to

himself, "What's so extraordinary about this Young Master Murong fellow, for everyone to act as though he were some sort of celestial phoenix amongst men. They don't care at all about Shaolin, the Beggar's Sect, or the Western Xia's 'League of Elites'. They just want to reach his side as soon as possible." He replied, "No need. Just loan me a boat. I'll paddle myself out."

Ah Bi mumbled to herself, "But you don't know the waterways. I don't think this is a good idea. Be careful, and don't run into that monk again."

Duan Yu stormily said, "It's best if all of you hurry and go meet up with your Young Master Murong. If I meet that monk again, at most I'll be burnt to death by him. I'm not your cousin or your young master. No need to worry about me." As he spoke, he quickly strode out of the room. As he left, he heard Bao Butong say, "We don't know what the origins are of that Tibetan monk either. We need to investigate." Wang Yuyan replied, "My cousin most likely knows. If we find him..."

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi escorted Duan Yu out. Ah Bi said, "Young Gentleman Duan, in the future, after you meet with our Young Master, perhaps you will become good friends with him. Our young master really likes to make friends." Duan Yu laughed coldly. "I'm not fit to be his friend." Hearing a large amount of resentment in his voice, Ah Bi felt very confused. She asked, "Young Gentleman Duan, why are you unhappy? Is it that our reception of you was too simple and brief?" Ah Zhu said, "Third Brother Bao has always been like this. Young Gentleman Duan, please don't be too upset. Allow Ah Bi and I pay our apologies to you." As she spoke, she grinned and curtsied towards him as Ah Bi did the same.

Duan Yu returned the courtesy, then took large steps towards the waterline. Arriving next to a small craft, he immediately tugged at the oars, sailing away into the lake. He felt a deep depression in his heart. As to why he felt this way, even he himself could not say. All he knew was that if

he stayed ashore for another moment longer, he would lose control of himself. It was even possible that he would begin to cry. He vaguely heard Ah Bi say, "Sister Ah Zhu, does the young master have enough spare clothing? Let's each sew a new set of clothing for him tonight." Ah Zhu replied, "Alright! You are so attentive and thoughtful."

Chapter 14: Intensely Drinking a Thousand Cups, and the Affairs of Men

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing [Second Edition]

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Duan Yu had been bullied by the Divine Farmers clan and the Mt. Wuliang Sword sect, coerced by the Divine Crocodile of the Southern Seas, imprisoned by Crown Prince Yanqing, kidnapped by Jiumozhi, then was forced to become a gardener at the Highland Manor of the Camellias. The misery and humiliation he had undergone in recent times was significant indeed, but never before had he felt such anger and indignation.

In all fairness, there was no one within the Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds who was truly impolite to him or intentionally tried to embarrass him. Although Bao Butong asked him to leave, he showed forbearance when he did so; he did not break Duan Yu's arms as he did Zhu Baokun, nor did he kick him away like a ball as he did to Yao Bodang. Wang Yuyan verbally expressed the desire for him to stay a bit longer, and Ah Zhu and Ah Bi solicitously escorted him off. But all of this only increased the unspeakable misery in his heart.

The evening wind rolled across the surface of the lake, carrying with it the scent of water chestnut leaves. Tugging mightily at the oars, Duan Yu wasn't sure whom his anger and hatred should be directed towards. He really couldn't say why he was as angry as this. Previously, Mu Wanqing, the Divine Crocodile, Crown Prince Yanqing, Jiumozhi, and Madame Wang had all exceptionally humiliated him, but he had maintained his calm and did not feel too wronged. In his innermost heart, he indistinctly felt as though perhaps it were because he deeply yearned for Wang Yuyan, but within

her heart, she didn't care about Duan Yu in the slightest. Even Ah Zhu and Ah Bi thought very lightly of him. Ever since he was young, he had been pampered and treated as a precious, beloved treasure by others. Within Dali, everyone from the Emperor on down felt that he was an extraordinary person. Even enemies had treated him thus; the Divine Crocodile, for example, had whole-heartedly wanted him to become his disciple. Jiumozhi, in expending so much effort to abduct him from Dali to Jiangnan, showed that he valued Duan Yu highly. And, of course, the young maidens such as Zhong Ling and Mu Wanqing fell in love with him almost at first sight.

He had never before been looked down upon or treated as coldly as he had been today. Although they were polite to him, it was polite indifference. Within their hearts, Young Master Murong was naturally much more important to them than he was. Over the past few days, whenever someone even mentioned Young Master Murong's name, a sensation would be created and everyone would become absorbed in listening closely. It seemed as though Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, Ah Bi, Bao Butong, and even this 'Elder Brother Deng', 'Second Brother Gongye', and 'Fourth Brother Feng' all lived for him.

Duan Yu had never before tasted the bitter fruit of envy or jealousy. Now, as he was paddling a boat in middle of the lake all by his lonesome, it seemed to him as though Young Master Murong's shadow appeared in the sky and was smirking at him. He seemed to hear Young Master Murong speak and ridicule him, saying, "Duan Yu, oh, Duan Yu. How can you ever compare to even a single strand of hair on my body? You are interested in my cousin, something which is like an insane shrimp or a toad being desirous of a heavenly swan. Isn't this disgraceful and ludicrous?"

As his heart filled with anger, the strength with which he pulled at the oars increased as well. After rowing for about two hours, his powerful internal energy slowly began to

come out. The more he rowed, the more vigorous he became, and the gloomy feeling in his heart slowly faded away as well. After rowing for two more hours, the night sky was slowly beginning to brighten. A small mountain peak appeared to the north, surrounded by clouds and mist. Approximating his current location, he decided that the 'Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds' and the 'Pavilion of Zither Melodies' were located to the east. All he had to do was keep rowing northwards, and he would not accidentally return to his place of origin.

But with each rowing motion, he felt an attachment and longing in his heart. He couldn't prevent himself from thinking that with every meter the boat travelled, he was becoming a meter away from Wang Yuyan.

Close to noon, he arrived at the base of that small mountain peak. Going ashore, he asked the locals where he was, and was told that he had arrived at Mr. Maji [Maji means 'Horse Tracks'], and was now very close to Wuxi.

He had seen the name 'Wuxi' before within a book. He knew that it was a large city that had become famous during the 'Spring and Autumn' period. He immediately returned to his boat and began rowing north again. After some time, he arrived at the city of Wuxi.

As he entered the city, he saw that pedestrians were hurrying about here and there, giving an appearance of a bustling market. Compared to Dali, it had its own unique style. As he leisurely strolled about, he suddenly smelled something delicious. It was the smell of caramel and soy sauce mixed into cooked meat. He hadn't eaten for quite some time and had spent the past few hours rowing a boat. He was famished, and immediately began to follow the delicious smell. After turning a corner, he saw a huge wine-house across the street. On its gold-lettered signboard were written the words, "The Pine and the Crane." The shop sign itself was very aged, long since blackened by mist and smoke. But in contrast, the golden characters on it were

gleaming and bright. The fragrant scent of wine and meat flowed out of the wine-house, and the chef's chopping sounds mixed with the calls of the customers and the staff.

As he entered the place, a waiter came and greeted him. Duan Yu ordered a kettle of wine and four types of food to go with the wine. Leaning against the railing, he poured himself a few cups and began to drink. Suddenly, he felt cold and dreary. He couldn't help but let out a loud sigh.

A large man sitting towards the west turned his head towards him. The man's two eyes, radiating frozen lightning, flashed across Duan Yu's face. Duan Yu saw that this person had an extremely large and tall physique, was thirty years or so of age, and wore an old grey gown that was already a bit tattered. He had thick eyebrows and big eyes, a high nose and broad lips, with a face that had the shape of the 'Guo' character. He looked as though he had endured many hardships, and when he turned around to look at Duan Yu, he displayed an aura of power and influence.

Duan Yu secretly praised, "What a man! He must be a fervent person from the northern nations of Yan and Zhao which are sung about in those elegies. Neither Jiangnan nor Dali can produce a person such as this. Bao Butong tooted his own horn about having a vigorous, heroic spirit. But only this man can be described as having a vigorous spirit and a heroic aura!" [Yan and Zhao are nations which existed during the Warring States period. They can roughly be approximated to be towards the north, near Beijing.]

On the big fellow's table was a plate of cooked beef, a large bowl of soup, and two kettles of wine. Aside from those three, there was nothing else. Even in eating and drinking, he appeared to be very unrestrained and displayed a heroic spirit.

After glancing at Duan Yu a few times, that man turned his head back and went back to eating and drinking. Duan Yu was feeling a bit lonely and bored. Wanting to make a new friend, he called a server over. Pointing to the back of

the big fellow, he said, "Put all of that gentleman's things on my tab."

Hearing Duan Yu give those instructions, the big fellow turned around and smiled. He nodded, but didn't say anything. Duan Yu wanted to strike up a conversation with him and relieve his own sense of loneliness, but couldn't find an appropriate way to begin.

After drinking three more cups of wine, Duan Yu heard the sound of footsteps on the stairway. Two men appeared from downstairs. One had a lame foot and propped himself up on a crutch, yet still walked very quickly. The other was an elder with a frowning, worried face. The two walked to the big fellow's table, then very politely bowed towards him. The big fellow nodded, but did not stand up or return their salute. The man with a lame foot said in a low voice, "I have a report, Elder Brother. The other party has arranged for us to meet with them at the crack of dawn tomorrow, at the wayside pavilion of Mt. Hui." The big fellow nodded, then said, "That's a bit rushed." The elder said, "I originally told them that we should meet up in three days time. But it seemed as though they knew that we haven't gathered all our forces yet, ridiculing and mocking us. They said that if we don't have the guts to face them, it's fine if we don't show up tomorrow."

The big fellow said, "Fine. Send down the word for everyone to arrive at Mt. Hui at midnight tonight. We'll get there first and wait for them there." The two bowed, then left.

The three spoke in very quiet tones, and none of the other guests could hear what they were saying. But Duan Yu had abundant internal energy and very acute hearing. Although he did not intend to intentionally eavesdrop on them, he naturally overheard every single word. Intentionally or unintentionally, that big fellow glanced at Duan Yu yet again. He saw that Duan Yu's head was lowered and he was looking away, as though he had overheard his

words. Instantly, his twin eyes were filled with a ferocious light. He let out a deep 'humph'. Startled, Duan Yu's left hand quivered. With a cracking sound, the wine cup he was holding fell to the floor and shattered. That big fellow smiled. "Brother, why are you so nervous? Why don't you come over and have a few cups with me?"

Duan Yu laughed. "Wonderful, wonderful!" He instructed the server to bring over his cup and his chopsticks, then moved to the big fellow's table and asked him his name. The big fellow smirked, "Brother, why ask when you clearly already know the answer? There's no need for us to rigidly stick to the proper forms. Won't it be a wonderful thing for us to drink a few large bowls of wine now? Afterwards, when we are clearly divided as enemies, we won't have the chance." Duan Yu laughed. "Brother, it seems as though you've mistaken me for someone else, perhaps an enemy. However, I love to hear the words, 'no need to rigidly stick to the proper forms'. Let's drink!" Pouring a cup of wine, he drained it at one go.

That big fellow smiled. "Brother, you are easygoing and straightforward. But your wine-glass is too small." He called out, "Bartender! Go bring me two large bowls and ten jin [five kilograms] worth of hard liquor!" Upon hearing the words, 'ten jin worth of hard liquor', the bartender and Duan Yu both jumped in shock. The bartender laughed, "Sir, will you be able to finish ten jin of hard liquor?" The big fellow pointed towards Duan Yu and said, "This gentleman is treating me. There's no need for you to be concerned about saving me money! If ten jin aren't enough, bring twenty jin!" Laughing, the bartender said, "Alright, alright!" After a short period of time, he brought out two large bowls and an enormous jug of liquor, placing them on the table.

The big fellow said, "Pour us two full bowls!" The bartender poured him two bowls as instructed. As he was pouring, Duan Yu felt the smell of the alcohol assault his nostrils, causing him to feel a bit uncomfortable. While in

Dali, he would only drink a few cups of wine occasionally, and had never seen anyone drink like this. He couldn't help but wrinkle his forehead. The big fellow laughed, "Why don't the two of us start off by drinking ten bowls together. What do you think?"

Duan Yu saw that there was more than a hint of ridicule in the big fellow's eyes. Normally, he would beg to be excused in this sort of situation and admit that he had very low tolerance for alcohol. But the previous night, he had been treated coldly and indifferently within the Waterside Pavilion of Fragrant Sounds. He also thought to himself, "This big fellow is most likely one of Young Master Murong's people. If he isn't Big Brother Deng or Second Brother Gongye, he's probably Fourth Brother Feng. He's already arranged to enter into a martial arts competition at Mt. Hui with his opponents, who must be either the Beggars' Clan or the Western Xia's 'League of Elites'. Hmph, what's so special about Young Master Murong? I refuse to be belittled and held in contempt by his underlings. At worst, I'll drink myself to death. What's the big deal?" He immediately puffed his chest out and loudly said, "I'll risk my life and accompany a gentleman! If I forget myself and act improperly later while drunk, please don't blame me, brother!" As he spoke, he lifted one of the bowls of liquor and gulped it down.

He drank down the entire bowl of wine in a fit of pique. Although Wang Yuyan wasn't nearby, in Duan Yu's mind, she might as well have been, as he considered himself competing with Murong Fu in drinking. He refused to admit defeat in front of the person he loved. Forget about merely drinking one large bowl of liquor; even if he had to drink a bowl full of poisoned wine, he would have downed it without the slightest hesitation.

Seeing how casually and straightforwardly Duan Yu was drinking, the big fellow was greatly surprised. Laughing loudly, he said, "Nicely done!" Lifting up his own bowl, he

poured the liquor down his throat, then set it down and poured them two more bowls.

Duan Yu laughed, "Good stuff! Good stuff!" He let out a breath, then drained that bowl in one gulp as well. The big fellow drained his own bowl, then once again poured two more. Each bowl contained at least half a jin of liquor [a quarter kilogram!]. Duan Yu had just drank two jin, and felt as though a raging fire was burning his innards. His head was already becoming confused, but he thought to himself, "What's so great about Murong Fu? What's so special about him? How can I lose to one of his underlings?" Taking the third bowl of alcohol, he drained that one as well.

The big fellow saw that he had become totally wasted in the blink of an eye. He was secretly amused, and knew that after this third bowl, Duan Yu would collapse to the floor very shortly.

Even before he drank the third bowl, Duan Yu felt as though he was going to throw up. After this third bowl of liquor entered his belly, all his organs seemed to be in a state of turmoil and were writhing. He tightly closed his mouth, refusing to allow any of the alcohol he had just drunk come back out. Suddenly, his dantian vibrated, sending forth a gush of vigorous energy. He felt as though the internal energy in his body was agitated, akin to how he felt back at the Heavenly Dragon Monastery when he was unable to control his internal energy. Immediately, he used the technique his uncle had taught him and called that gush of internal energy back to his 'Dazhui' acupoint.

As it were, he had so much alcohol in his body that it was beginning to mix with his internal energy. Alcohol is something which has form and substance. Unlike internal energy, it could not hide itself within his acupoints. But Duan Yu had an easygoing disposition, and allowed his internal energy to naturally travel from his 'Tianzong' acupoint to his 'Jianzhen' acupoint, then travel to his left arm's 'Xiaohai', 'Zhizheng', and 'Yanglao' acupoints, then

through his left hand's 'Yanggu', 'Houhuo', and 'Qiangu' acupoints, before rushing out of his pinky finger's 'Shaoze' acupoint. The route which his internal energy travelled was precisely that of the Shaoze sword technique of the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. Originally, the Shaoze sword technique was that of a vigorous, invisible sword qi. But at this moment, a stream of alcohol slowly and unhurriedly poured out of his little finger.

At first, Duan Yu didn't notice this, but after a while, he began to feel sober. After realizing that alcohol was pouring from his little finger, he secretly cried out, "Extremely miraculous!" His left hand was pointing to the floor, and the big fellow didn't pay it any attention. He just saw that while just moments ago, Duan Yu was so drunk that his eyes were closing, Duan Yu now seemed alert and vigorous. He couldn't help but secretly feel amazed. Laughing, the big fellow said, "Brother, it seems you have quite some tolerance for alcohol! Not bad at all." He poured two more bowls of wine.

Duan Yu laughed, "My capacity for wine is extraordinary because of your presence. As the saying goes, 'When meeting with a bosom friend, a thousand cups of wine is still too few.' I estimate that there are no more than twenty or so cups worth of wine in each bowl. In order to reach a thousand cups, we'll still need to drink another forty or fifty bowls. I'm afraid I won't be able to drink another fifty!" As he spoke, he drank the bowl of liquor in front of him, then immediately began to exercise his internal energy. He rested his left hand on top of the window railing next to their table, forcing the alcohol out from his pinky finger and causing it to flow down the wall. This was a perfect deception, which not even gods or devils could discern. In a short amount of time, he had forced out all of the four bowls worth of liquor from his body.

The big fellow saw that Duan Yu had just carelessly downed four large bowls of very potent liquor. He was extremely pleased, and said, "Wonderful, wonderful! When

meeting with a bosom friend, a thousand cups of wine is still too few. Let me drink a few bowls first!" He immediately poured out two bowls of wine, then drank both of them in succession. Next, he poured two more bowls for Duan Yu. Duan Yu casually and cheerfully drank both while engaging him in conversation. It seemed as though he drank the hard liquor even more easily than others drank water and ate food.

Drinking in such a manner, the two of them astonished all of the other patrons of 'The Pine and the Crane'. Even the kitchen cook and the fire-starters came out and surrounded them upstairs, watching as they drank.

The big fellow said, "Bartender! Bring me twenty more jin of liquor!" The bartender stuck out his tongue in disbelief. He too was caught up in the excitement of it and did not try to dissuade him this time. He left, and when he returned, he brought back another huge vase of liquor with him.

Duan Yu traded bowls with the big fellow, one after the other. In the time it takes to eat a meal, they drank over thirty big bowls of liquor.

Duan Yu knew that he was playing a deceitful trick with his little finger. The alcohol would simply cycle through his body then immediately pour out from his finger. It could be said that his alcohol tolerance was inexhaustible and infinite. But that big fellow had drank over thirty bowls worth, based purely on actual ability. And yet, he still seemed utterly composed, neither batting an eye nor displaying the slightest hint of intoxication. Duan Yu secretly felt great admiration for him. At first, he viewed the big fellow with animosity, thinking him one of Young Master Murong's people. But now, seeing his bold and heroic air, his regal, heroic spirit, Duan Yu couldn't help but cherish the man. He thought to himself, "If we continue competing like this, it's impossible for me to lose, but if this fellow keeps drinking the way we are now, he'll invariably damage his

health.” As they reached their fortieth bowl, he said, “My dear brother, we’ve drunk about forty bowls by now, right?”

The big fellow laughed, “Brother, it seems you are still very sober and clear-headed! You’re still able to keep clear count.” Duan Yu laughed, “Both of us have met our match today. I think it won’t be easy for either of us to claim victory. But if we keep on drinking in such a manner, I’m afraid I won’t have enough money to pay for it!” Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out an embroidered pouch. As he tossed it onto the table, a light clinking sound could be heard. Clearly, he didn’t have too much money in his pouch. Duan Yu had been abducted by Jiumozhi from Dali, and didn’t have the chance to bring any possessions. The bag was embroidered with silver and gold thread; clearly, it was a rare and precious object. But at a glance, one could tell that it wasn’t filled with very much.

As soon as he saw it, the big fellow began to laugh loudly. He withdrew an ingot of silver from his own pouch, tossing it onto the table. Grabbing Duan Yu by the hand, he said, “Let’s go!”

Duan Yu was very happy. While he was in Dali, it was hard for him to make any real friends, due to him being the young prince. Today, he had become friends with this fellow, not because of his scholarly knowledge, nor because of his martial arts, but purely because of his fictitious drinking ability. This was something rare and strange indeed!

After going downstairs, the big fellow began walking faster and faster. After leaving the city gates, his steps grew larger and larger still as he rushed down the street. Duan Yu gathered his energy then ran alongside him, shoulder to shoulder. Although Duan Yu did not know martial arts, he had an extremely abundant reservoir of internal energy. This sort of quick movement was nothing to him at all. That big fellow glanced at him, then smiled. “Great. Let’s see who is faster.” Immediately, he upped his speed, starting to run.

After running for but a few steps, Duan Yu tripped and almost fell because he was moving too hurriedly. Only after taking a staggering step leftwards did he steady himself. This step happened to be one of the movements of the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves'. By unintentionally using this movement, he actually gained a meter or two. Secretly elated, the next step he took was also based on the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves', at which point he caught up to the big fellow. The two travelled forwards, shoulder to shoulder. The wind whistled past them as they flew past all the trees by their side.

When he was learning the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves', Duan Yu didn't have any intention of competing in speed with anybody. Now, he was like an arrowed nocked onto a taut bow; he didn't have any choice but to be shot out. All he could do was to do his utmost; he didn't actually have any intention to outdo the big fellow. All he did was move in accordance to the footwork he learned while using his incomparably deep internal energy. He no longer cared at all as to whether that big fellow was in front of him or behind him.

The big fellow lengthened his strides, moving faster and faster. In the blink of an eye, he far outpaced Duan Yu. But if he took the slightest of breathers, Duan Yu would immediately catch up to him. Glancing at him askance, the big fellow saw that Duan Yu's movements were natural and unrestrained, as though he were taking a stroll within a courtyard. There wasn't a single bit of a forced aura to his footwork. He secretly admired Duan Yu. Adding more force to his steps, he once more left Duan Yu behind, but very shortly Duan Yu once again caught up to him. After trying this out a few times, the big fellow realized that Duan Yu's internal energy was extremely vigorous, greater than that of his own. It wouldn't be too hard for him to outrace Duan Yu in a ten-li long race, but if the race continued for thirty or forty li, it would be very difficult for a victor to be determined. If the

race reached sixty li, he would definitely lose. Laughing loudly, he came to a stop and said, "Young Master Murong, today I, Qiao Feng, submit to you! Gusu's Murong family really lives up to its name!"

Duan Yu rushed past him a few steps, but immediately turned around and came back. Hearing the man address him as 'Young Master Murong', he hurriedly replied, "My name is Duan Yu. Brother, you've mistaken me for someone else!"

The big fellow looked astonished. "What? You...you aren't Murong Fu, Young Master Murong?"

Duan Yu smiled. "Every day since my arrival in Jiangnan, I have heard of Young Master Murong's famous name. I admire him very highly, but to this day I haven't had the good fortune of meeting him." He thought to himself, "If this fellow misrecognized me as Murong Fu, then clearly he isn't one of his people." When he came to this realization, he felt all the more warmly towards the man, and asked, "Brother, would your surname, then, be Qiao, and your given name be Feng?"

The look of shock had not disappeared from the fellow's face. He said, "Just so. I am Qiao Feng." Duan Yu said, "Your humble brother, I, am a person from Dali. It is my great fortune to be able to make friends with such a hero as yourself during this trip to Jiangnan." Qiao Feng muttered to himself, "Oh, so you are a scion of Dali's Duan lineage. No wonder, no wonder. Brother Duan, what important business brings you to Jiangnan?"

Duan Yu replied, "It's a bit embarrassing to explain. Your humble brother was captured and brought here by an enemy." He immediately gave a brief explanation of how he was kidnapped by Jiumozhi, how he met two of Murong Fu's servant girls, etc. Although he only briefly summarize the long story, he didn't hold anything back at all, nor did he try to conceal any of the humiliating things which had happened to him.

After hearing his story, Qiao Feng was both astonished and pleased. He said, "Brother Duan, you are an extremely straightforward and honest man. I've never met anyone like you. Although we've just met, I feel as though you are an old friend. What say you and I become sworn blood brothers?" Overjoyed, Duan Yu replied, "That is more than I can wish for." They compared their ages. Qiao Feng was eleven years older than Duan Yu; naturally, he assumed the rank of Elder Brother. They immediately built a mound of dirt, stuck in a few sticks of incense, then kowtowed eight times towards heaven. Qiao Feng addressed Duan Yu as 'worthy junior brother', and Duan Yu addressed him as 'Elder Brother'. Both of them were extremely pleased.

Duan Yu replied, "At 'The Pine and the Crane', I secretly overheard you, Elder Brother, talk about an appointment you've made with an enemy for tonight. Although your humble brother doesn't know any martial arts, I'd still like to go check out the fun. Elder Brother, will you agree to this?"

Qiao Feng interrogated him for a bit and learned he really didn't know any martial arts at all. He couldn't help but click his tongue in astonishment. "Worthy Brother, with your incredible cultivation of internal energy, learning first-class martial arts would be as easy as taking an item out of a bag. You would face no difficulties at all. With regards to the battle tonight, there's no reason why you cannot come with us to watch. Only, I'm worried that that enemy will use vicious and sinister techniques. Worthy Brother, do not reveal your presence no matter what." Duan Yu happily replied, "Naturally, I'll listen to your orders, Elder Brother." Laughing, Qiao Feng said, "It's still early. Why don't we two brothers go back to Wuxi and drink for a while longer before going to Mt. Hui." Hearing him say that he wanted to go back and drink even more wine, Duan Yu was shocked. He said, "Elder Brother, when I was competing with you in drinking, I was actually deceiving you. Please don't blame me." He immediately explained how he purged the alcohol

from his system via the 'Shaoze' acupoint. Astonished, Qiao Feng said, "Brother, this...is this the outstanding skill, the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'?" Duan Yu replied, "Precisely so. I learned it not too long ago, and am very unskilled with it."

Qiao Feng was stunned for some time, then sighed, "My master once told me that there is a legend in the martial world that Dali's Duan family possesses a technique known as the 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians,' which uses invisible sword qi to kill people. No one knows if this is true or not. So such a divine art actually exists in the world."

Duan Yu replied, "Actually, aside from using it to compete with you in drinking, this skill isn't very useful. I was kidnapped by that monk, Jiumozhi, and wasn't able to defend myself at all. The people of the world overstate and exaggerate the strength of this 'Divine Sword of the Six Meridians'. Elder Brother, alcohol is very harmful to the body. You need to know when and where to stop. Today, I think it's best if we don't go drinking again." Qiao Feng laughed loudly. "Worthy Brother, your advice is wise. Only, your foolish Elder Brother has a body like an ox. Ever since I was young, I loved to drink alcohol. The more I drink, the more energetic I get. Tonight, we are about to confront a major opponent. I need to drink a lot of hard liquor before going there and mixing it up with them." As the two spoke, they returned to Wuxi. This time, they were not competing in speed, and the two of them casually strolled back in, shoulder to shoulder.

Overjoyed at having made such a good friend, Duan Yu felt extremely elated. Nonetheless, he still constantly thought about Murong Fu and Wang Yuyan. After casually chatting for a while, he couldn't help but ask, "Elder Brother, earlier you misrecognized me as Young Master Murong. Can it be that I look somewhat similar to him?"

Qiao Feng replied, "I've long heard of the fame of Gusu's Murong family. I have come to Jiangnan on their account. I

hear that Murong Fu has a handsome, learned appearance, and is about twenty eight or twenty nine years old. He's several years older than you, but I could not believe that aside from Murong Fu, there could be another handsome young man with such impressive martial arts. Thus, I mistook you for him. I'm very embarrassed."

Hearing him say that Murong Fu was a handsome young man with impressive martial arts, Duan Yu felt an uncomfortable sourness in his heart. He asked, "Elder Brother, have you come from afar to make friends with him?"

Qiao Feng let out a sigh, and a downcast expression appeared on his face. Shaking his head, he said, "Originally, I had hoped to become friends with him, but I'm afraid I won't be able to, now." Duan Yu asked, "Why not?" Qiao Feng replied, "I have an extremely close bosom friend who died a violent death two months ago. Everyone says that it was Murong Fu who did the vile deed." Duan Yu nervously said, "Using an opponent's technique, utilizing it upon the opponent!" Qiao Feng replied, "Right! The injury which my friend died from was inflicted by someone using the skill which he himself became famous for." As he said this, his voice became choked with sobs, and he looked very grieved. After pausing for a while, he said, "But there are many strange things which occur in the martial world, and its people are hard to fathom. I cannot place blame on someone solely based upon rumor and hearsay. Thus, I have come to Jiangnan to ferret out the truth."

Duan Yu asked, "And what is the truth?" Qiao Feng shook his head. "It is hard to say at the moment. That friend of mine became famous long ago and displayed upright conduct. He had a meek, modest temperament, and handled things very rationally. He wouldn't have offended Young Master Murong without a good reason. It's very hard for a person to puzzle out why someone would have murdered him."

Duan Yu nodded. He thought to himself, "On the surface, Elder Brother looks crude and straightforward, but on the inside, he is actually extremely careful and meticulous. He's not like Mr. Huo, Guo Yanzhi, Sima Lin, and the others, who insist that Young Master Murong is the killer without even doing any independent investigations." He asked, "Who, then, are the powerful opponents which you have arranged an appointment with?"

Qiao Feng replied, "They are..." Just as he said these two words, two beggarly fellows dressed in tattered clothes rushed towards them. Qiao Feng immediately fell silent. Exercising their qinggong, the two appeared before them in the twinkling of an eye. They bowed in unison. One said, "Chief, four people have rushed into the 'Hall of Great Righteousness'. They've demonstrated exceptional skill. Hall-master Jiang, seeing that they seem to have come with evil intentions and concerned that he might not be able to hold them off, ordered the two of us to locate the 'Hall of Great Benevolence' and request aid".

Hearing that the two extremely respectfully address Qiao Feng as 'Chief', Duan Yu thought to himself, "So Elder Brother is the lord and master of some clan or sect."

Qiao Feng nodded, then asked, "What type of people are they?" One man replied, "Three of them are females. One of them is a very tall, very skinny middle-aged man who is extremely unreasonable and arrogant." Qiao Feng humphed. "Hall-master Jiang is a bit too careful. There's only one opponent. Can it be that he can't hold him off?" The man said, "Chief, it seems as though those three woman also know martial arts." Qiao Feng chuckled, then said, "Fine. I'll go check it out." A happy expression appeared on the faces of those two, and they replied in unison, "Yes sir!" Letting their hands fall, they retreated behind Qiao Feng.

Qiao Feng said to Duan Yu, "Brother, shall you come along with us?" Duan Yu replied, "Naturally." The two men led them westwards, following a crooked, winding path, until

they arrived at a countryside farmland. The land around them was all very fertile, as there were many rivers intersecting all about the place.

After walking for a few li, they arrived by a forest filled with apricot trees. A strange voice could be heard coming from that forest. "Brother Murong went to Luoyang to meet with your chief. Why is it that the people of the Beggars' Clan have come to Wuxi? Aren't you intentionally avoiding him? It's not a big deal if you guys are cowards and afraid of dying, but aren't you guys tiring Brother Murong out by causing him to make a trip in vain? Outrageous, this is totally outrageous!"

As soon as Duan Yu heard this voice, his heart began to beat frantically. It was precisely the voice of "Mr. Tis not so, tis not so": Mr. Bao! He thought to himself, "Is Miss Wang with him? Didn't they say there were three women with him?" Then he thought to himself, "The Beggars' Clan is the largest clan in all the world. Can it be that today, I have become sworn brothers with their chief?"

A man who spoke with a northern accent loudly replied, "Did Young Master Murong make an appointment in advance to meet with our humble clan's chief?" Mr. Bao replied, "It makes no difference whether they made an appointment or not. Since Young Master Murong went to Luoyang, the chief of the Beggars' Clan can't just up and leave and let him have made the trip in vain. Outrageous, simply outrageous!" The other person said, "Did Young Master Murong send a message or a scroll informing our humble clan?" Mr. Bao replied, "How should I know? I am neither Young Master Murong, nor the chief of the Beggars' Clan. How would I know? This question of yours makes no sense. Outrageous, totally outrageous!"

Qiao Feng's face sunk, and he quickly strode into the forest. Following him in, Duan Yu saw that within the forest was two groups of people facing each other. Behind Mr. Bao

stood three females. As soon as Duan Yu's gaze came across one of the maiden's faces, it froze there.

Naturally, the young maiden was Wang Yuyan. She let out a soft exclamation. "You came as well?" Duan Yu replied, "I came as well." He stupidly stared at her, utterly enraptured. Wang Yuyan blushed and she turned her head away. She thought to herself, "This person is staring at me like that. He's so rude." But she knew that Duan Yu greatly admired her beauty, and so she couldn't help but secretly feel happy instead of being angry with him.

Standing on the opposite side of Bao Butong was a bunch of beggars in tattered clothing. When the person standing in front saw that Qiao Feng had arrived, a look of great joy appeared on his face. He immediately rushed forward, and led all of the beggar's behind him into a deep bow. They called out in unison, "Chief, we, your subordinates pay our respects to you!"

Clasping his fists, Qiao Feng replied, "Brothers, it is good to see you."

Bao Butong still had a look of arrogance on his face. He said, "Hmph, so this is Chief Qiao, leader of the Beggars' Clan? My name is Bao Butong. I'm sure that you've heard of me before." Qiao Feng replied, "So it is Bao the Third! I've long admired your illustrious name. It is my good fortune to be able to meet you today." Bao Butong replied, "Tis not so, tis not so! What illustrious name do I have? I only have a stinking name! Everyone knows that I, Bao Butong, like to provoke disputes and insult people with my words. Heh heh, Chief Qiao, you are in the wrong for coming so casually to Jiangnan"

The Beggars' Clan was the largest clan in the world. The chief of the clan held a position of great veneration and respect; the disciples of the clan treated him as though he were a living divinity. Seeing how impolite Bao Butong was towards their chief, and hearing his reproachful words, everyone present was filled with righteous indignation.

Behind Hall-master Jiang of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness' stood six or seven people who were gripping the hilts of their sabres, or clenching their fists. All of them wanted to charge forwards.

But Qiao Feng only lightly replied, "How am I in the wrong? Mr. Bao, please advise me."

Bao Butong replied, "My family's Young Master Murong knows that you, Chief Qiao, are an outstanding personage, and that there are many amazing figures within the Beggars' Clan. Thus, he personally rushed to Luoyang to pay his respects to you. How could you so contentedly come to Jiangnan instead? Outragous, simply outrageous!"

Qiao Feng smiled. "If I had known in advance that Young Master Murong was going to honor us at Luoyang with his presence, I would have respectfully awaited his arrival. Please forgive me for the sin of failing to meet a guest." As he spoke, he cupped his fist in a salute.

Duan Yu secretly applauded him. "Elder Brother's words are very courteous and totally in keeping with his status as the leader of a clan. If instead he had gotten into a verbal battle with Mr. Bao, he would have lost some status instead."

Unexpectedly, Bao Butong continued to press the case. Nodding, he said, "You did commit the sin of failing to meet a guest. Although there is the saying that 'the one who commits an offense unknowingly has done nothing wrong', whether or not the sinner is to be punished lies wholly in the hands of others!" Just as he was feeling very self-satisfied, several people within the apricot forest began to loudly laugh in unison. The sound of their laughter shook the heavens. Within the midst of the laughter, someone said, "I've long heard that Jiangnan's Bao Butong loves to let out dog farts. You really live up to your reputation!"

Bao Butong replied, "As the saying goes, a loud fart doesn't stink, and a stinky fart isn't loud. The dog's fart I just heard was both stinky and loud. Can it be that it came from the six elders of the Beggars' Clan?"

That person replied, "If Bao Butong is aware of who the six elders of the Beggars' Clan are, how does he dare to continually spout nonsense?" Before the sound of their words had died away, four old men out from behind the apricot forest. Some had white beards and white hair, others had faces which were glowing with health. Each of them held a weapon in their hands, and they formed a rectangle around Bao Butong, Wang Yuyan, and the others.

Bao Butong naturally knew that the Beggars' Clan was not only the largest clan in the world, but also the top clan amongst the best large clans. The experts within the clan were as plentiful as the clouds. Its six elders naturally had an even more impressive reputation in the martial world. But he had a naturally arrogant disposition, and ever since he was young had an attitude of fearing neither heaven nor hell. Now, seeing that he had been secretly surrounded by four of the six elders, he quietly groaned to himself, "That's not good, that's not good. Looks like today my illustrious reputation will be dragged through the dust." But he didn't outwardly show any fear at all. He said, "What instruction do you four old fellows intend to offer me? So you want to get into a brawl with Mr. Bao? Why haven't the other two elders appeared as well to help you out? Hiding and sneaking about, are they intending to ambush me? Good, good, absolutely great! Mr. Bao loves to fight!"

Suddenly, a voice sounded out from mid-air. "Who is the person who likes to fight more than anyone else in the world? Is it Mr. Bao? Wrong, wrong! It is Jiangnan's 'Gust of Wind', Feng Bo'e!"

Raising his head, Duan Yu saw that a man was standing on a branch of an apricot tree. The branch continuously waved up and down, but the man simply bobbed up and down along with it. The man appeared to be thirty two or thirty three years of age, had a small, thin frame, hollow cheeks, and a rat-like beard split into two strands, and drooping eyebrows. He looked extremely ugly. Duan Yu

thought to himself, "It seems that this person is the 'Fourth Brother Feng' which Ah Zhu and Ah Bi were talking about." Indeed, he heard Ah Bi call out, "Fourth Brother Feng, have you heard any news about the young master?"

Feng Bo'e called out, "Wonderful. We've met up with some excellent opponent's today! Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, we'll discuss the young master's affairs later." He somersaulted down from the branch, throwing himself at the short and stout elder who stood north of their group.

That elder was wielding a steel staff. He suddenly struck out with it, attacking Feng Bo'e's chest. This steel staff was as thick as a goose egg, and when it struck out, it carried with it a vigorous wind. The force of it was fierce and awesome indeed. Feng Bo'e shot his body up, stretching out his hand to seize the staff. The elder flipped his hand around. The staff trembled, then the other end shot out and attacked Feng Bo'e's chest again. Feng Bo'e cried out, "Wonderful!" He suddenly ducked down, snatching at his opponent's waist. The steel staff had already struck out and could not immediately be retracted to block this blow. Seeing how close the enemy was to him, the elder countered with a flying kick to his stomach.

Feng Bo'e slanted his body and dodged this kick, then actually continued the motion and attacked the red-faced elder to the east side. With a flash of dazzling white light, a broadsword appeared in Feng Bo'e's hand and he launched a horizontal chop. The red-faced elder was wielding a demon-headed sabre. The sabre was extremely long, with the back of the sabre being thick and the cutting part sharp and thin. Seeing Feng Bo'e chopping at him, he lifted up his demon-headed sabre to directly blocked the chop with one of his own, intending to slam the edge of his blade against Feng Bo'e's. Feng Bo'e called out, "Your weapon is too fearful. I'm not going to directly clash mine against it!" He leapt a few meters, then launched a backwards chop towards the white-bearded elder at the south side.

The white-bearded elder wielded a steel mace in his right hand. The surface of the mace was covered with spikes. It was a weapon designed to penetrate an opponent's outer defenses. Seeing that Feng Bo'e had launched a backwards chop, but that the red-faced elder had not yet fully retracted the power of the chop from his demon-headed sabre, he felt that if he warded off the blow right now, it could be construed as the two elders launching a pincer attack against Feng Bo'e. He greatly valued his own status and was unwilling to fight against him two on one. Immediately, he sidestepped and dodged the attack instead.

He didn't know that Feng Bo'e simply loved fighting. The more thrilling the fight, the more happy he was. He didn't really care too much about who the winner was or who the loser was, and never followed any of the ordinary rules to fighting. When the white-bearded elder sidestepped the attack, it was obvious to every present that he was intentionally giving way. But Feng Bo'e paid no attention at all to the customary rites and rituals of the martial world. Upon seeing that there was a weakness to be exploited, he struck out with four chops in a row. All of them were advancing and attacking strokes, carrying with them the force of the fluttering wind and incomparable swiftness.

The white-bearded elder didn't expect him to take the opportunity to attack. This was truly impolite, and he hurriedly waved his mace to block. He had to take four steps back before regaining his footing. By this time, he had been backed against an apricot tree and no longer was able to retreat any further. He launched a horizontal strike with his mace. The technique he just used was his best skill for going from defense to offense to kill an opponent. He didn't expect that Feng Bo'e would shout out, "Lemme fight another one!" Instead of blocking, he simply retreated, his broadsword spinning about in a circle as he launched an attack against the fourth elder. By the time the white-bearded elder's attack was launched, the opponent was long gone. He was

so angry that he repeatedly let out angry breaths, causing his white beard to fly up high.

The fourth elder had two very long arms. In his left hand, he was carrying a very soft weapon. Seeing Feng Bo'e charge at him, he lifted his left arm and unveiled his weapon. It was a gunnysack used to hold rice. As the wind blew into it, the gunnysack opened and expanded. He struck out with the open in the sack towards Feng Bo'e's head, trying to cover it.

Feng Bo'e was both startled and delighted. He cried out, "Wonderful, wonderful! I'll fight with you!" There was nothing more he liked better than fighting. If his opponent's utilized unusual techniques or strange weaponry, he would go wild with joy, much like how a person who loved to go sightseeing might react when seeing a famous mountain or a large river, or how a person who loved eating and drinking might react when tasting a wonderful new dish for the first time. He had never even heard of anyone who used a gunnysack as a weapon, much less fought with him. He was so overjoyed that the surplus joy turned into caution, as he carefully jabbed out with his broadsword, wanting to see if he could use his weapon to poke holes in the sack. The long-armed elder tossed the gunnysack to his right arm, then, spinning his fist, launched a punch at Feng Bo'e.

Feng Bo'e raised his head upwards, dodging the blow, and was just about to launch a counterattack with his broadsword against the elder's lower parts. But the long-armed elder had mastered an extremely brilliant fist technique known as the "Arm Passing Through". Just when it seemed the energy from his punch had dissipated, new energy appeared and his fist continued forward another half-foot. Fortunately, Feng Bo'e was a person who loved fighting and had been through over a thousand battles, large or small. He could come up with ways to improvise his way out of a bad situation like none other, and as the fist came towards his face, he opened his mouth and chomped at it.

The long-armed elder had expected to be able to knock loose a few of his teeth with this punch. How could he have imagined that just as his fist reached Feng Bo'e, Feng Bo'e would open his mouth and bite at him with all those pearly white teeth? He hurriedly withdrew his hand, but was just a bit too late. He let out a loud cry as Feng Bo'e's teeth drew blood from the tips of his fingers. Some of the onlookers began to curse violently, while others began laughing loudly.

Bao Butong said in a perfect deadpan, "Fourth Brother Feng, this technique you just used, 'Lu Dongbin Bites the Dog', really lives up to its reputation! You've practiced it to a legendary, mythical level. That you can reach such a level is all due to you spending ten bitter years, braving summer heat and winter frost, practicing this technique and biting to death one thousand eight hundred white dogs, black dogs, and splotchy dogs."

Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi all began to laugh. Duan Yu laughed, "Miss Wang, you know everything there is to know about the martial arts of the world. What school or clan does this technique of biting people belong to?" Wang Yuyan smiled slightly, "This is a skill which is unique to brother Feng. I don't know it." Bao Butong said, "You don't know it? Heh heh, you are too ignorant and ill-informed! 'The Nine Great Stances of Lu Dongbin Biting Dogs'. Each stance contains eight orthodox and unorthodox biting techniques. Eight times nine is seventy two, giving this style a total of seventy two biting techniques. This is an extremely high level martial arts technique!" Seeing how delighted Wang Yuyan was in listening to Bao Butong's nonsense, Duan Yu also wanted to make a few jokes. But suddenly he realized, "That long-armed elder is one of Elder Brother Qiao's subordinates. How can I make fun of him?" He hurriedly shut his mouth.

At this time, the sound of roaring wind could be heard, as the long-armed elder waved his gunnysack about, turning it

into a yellow blur and enveloping Feng Bo'e within his techniques. But Feng Bo'e's own broadsword techniques were brilliant and wondrous, and he used it to impede the enemy's advance, allowing him to fend the elder off. Only, he did not know all the techniques of the gunnysack, and he had already experienced the power of the 'Arm Passing Through' fist technique. The 'technique' he had used to counter it, 'Lu Dongbin Bites the Dog', only landed by sheer luck earlier and could not be used again. Thus, at this time, he didn't dare slacken up in the slightest.

Qiao Feng, seeing how Feng Bo'e was able to take on the long-armed elder's 'Arm Passing Through' fist technique for over a hundred stances without being defeated, was secretly astonished. His impression of Young Master Murong went up another level.

The three other elders of the Beggars' Clan retreated to one side, raptly watching the ferocious battle.

Ah Bi saw that Feng Bo'e would not be able to hold out for long, and grew worried. She asked Wang Yuyan, "Miss Wang, this respected elder uses a gunnysack as his weapon. What type of technique is this?" Frowning, Wang Yuyan said, "I've never read about this sort of technique in the books. The fist technique is the 'Arm Passing Through' fist technique. As for the gunnysack technique, it seems to possess the strength of the 'Thirteen Circling Soft-Whip Strikes of Dabie Mountain', combined with the techniques of the 'Eighty One Three-Sectioned-Staff Techniques' of Hubei's Ruan family. It seems as though that the gunnysack technique is something he himself invented.

Her voice was not particularly loud, but the words, 'Thirteen Circling Soft-Whip Strikes of Dabie Mountain' and 'Eighty One Three-Sectioned-Staff Techniques of Hubei's Ruan family' thundered in the long-armed elder's ears. Originally, he was a disciple of Hubei's Ruan family, having learned the three-sectioned-staff techniques from them. Afterwards, he committed the great offense of killing one of

his elders. Thus, he changed his name and abandoned the three-sectioned-staff, refusing to ever use it again, so that no one would ever know of his origins. Unexpectedly, although he had done the best he could to abandon the martial arts he learned as a child, in the midst of a major battle he automatically revealed some of them. He was astonished. "How is it that this girl knows about my origins?" He thought that the shameful deeds which he committed decades ago were known to this girl. With his attention thus diverted, Feng Bo'e launched a series of broadsword attacks which he found difficult to cope with.

He retreated three steps in a row, hurriedly dodging aside. Seeing that Feng Bo'e's broadsword was about to arrive, he immediately sent out a flying left kick, striking at Feng Bo'e's right wrist. With a wave of the broadsword, Feng Bo'e chopped at his foot. The long-armed elder kicked out with his right leg as well in tandem, sending his body into mid-air. Feng Bo'e saw that, despite his great age, this elder was strong and vigorous, not at all inferior to younger people, and couldn't help but exclaim, "Wonderful!" With a whooshing sound, Feng Bo'e launched a punch at his kneecap. As the long-armed elder's body was in midair, it was very difficult for him to dodge this attack. If it landed, his kneecap would disintegrate and his leg would snap.

Feng Bo'e saw that his opponent refused to change his move, despite his fist almost having reached the elder's kneecap. Suddenly, he felt as though the sound of the wind had picked up. His opponent had opened the mouth of his gunnysack, and was about to cover Feng Bo'e's head with it! Although he could shatter the elder's kneecap with this punch, it would be a huge disaster for his head to be covered with the gunnysack. He immediately changed his punch into a sweeping strike, intending to sweep aside the gunnysack strike. The long-armed elder inclined his right arm slightly to the side and spun the bag about, capturing Feng Bo'e's fist within it.

The difference in size between Feng Bo'e's small fist and the huge opening in the gunnysack was significant. Although it was easy to cover Feng Bo'e's fist, there was no way it could actually trap it. As soon as Feng Bo'e retracted his hand, it came out from within the gunnysack. Suddenly, he felt slight pain on his upper arm, as though it had been pierced by slender needles. When he took a look, he felt great shock; there was a tiny scorpion attached to his upper arm! This scorpion was smaller than most, but it was multicolored and bright, appearing to be very fearsome. Feng Bo'e knew that he was in trouble, and immediately exerted all his strength to shake the scorpion off. Unfortunately, the scorpion's stinger was firmly lodged in his arm, and no matter what he did, he could not shake it off.

Feng Bo'e hurriedly stretched out the broadsword in his right arm, slapping the flat of it against his left arm. With a clapping sound, the multicolored scorpion was smushed. But if the long-armed elder put this scorpion in his bag, its venom definitely wouldn't be something which could be easily dealt with. Even ordinary beggars were extremely adept at using poisonous substances, much less one of their six elders. He immediately leapt three meters away, withdrawing an antidote from his robes and immediately swallowing it down.

The long-armed elder did not pursue him. Putting away his gunnysack, he instead turned to stare at Wang Yuyan, thinking to himself, "How did this girl know that I am from Hubei's Ruan family?" Bao Butong was extremely concerned. He hurriedly said, "Fourth Brother, how do you feel?" Feng Bo'e waved his left arm a few times, but felt nothing out of the ordinary. He was very puzzled, thinking to himself, "It's impossible for the multicolored scorpion in the gunnysack not to have some oddities about it." He said, "No problem..." Just as he said these words, with a thudding sound, he fell down, face-forwards....

Bao Butong hurriedly propped him up, repeatedly asking, "What's wrong? What's wrong?" The flesh and muscles on Feng Bo'e's face had stiffened into an extremely forced smile. Bao Butong was shocked. He immediately sealed the acupoints around Feng Bo'e's wrist, elbow, and shoulder, intending to stop the progress of the poison. How could he know that the poison of the multicolored scorpion acted extremely quickly? Although it wasn't so lethal as to 'seal the throat upon touching blood', it was on a similar level. The venom acted more quickly than even the toxins of vipers. Feng Bo'e opened his mouth, wanting to speak, but all he could muster out was a few horrifying croaking sounds. Seeing how deadly this poison was, Bao Butong feared that it might already be too late to save him. Feeling inconsolable grief and rage, he let out a loud howl and threw himself at the long-armed elder.

The short and stout elder who wielded the steel staff said, "You want to fight in turns and tire him out? Allow this shorty to spar with the heroes of Gusu's Murong family!" His steel staff shot out, striking towards Bao Butong. This was an extremely heavy weapon, but he wielded it as though it were as light as a feather. His techniques were very quick and agile, as though he were actually using a sword. Although Bao Butong was extremely angry, his opponent was very powerful and he did not dare to ignore him. He intended to capture the short and stout elder and use him to force the long-armed elder to give Feng Bo'e an antidote to save his life. He immediately began to use seizing and capturing hand techniques, launching raids in between the hollow spaces left by the steel staff's attacks.

Ah Zhu and Ah Bi each stood to one side of Feng Bo'e. Tears glimmered in their eyes as they cried out, "Fourth Brother! Fourth Brother!" Wang Yuyan had no knowledge at all regarding the usage of poison or the curing of poison, and felt very regretful. "In all the martial arts scrolls I've read, there was a lot of information regarding the usage of

poison. Only, I believed all of that stuff was useless and didn't even take a look at them. If I had at least glanced at them, I would remember at least a little bit and wouldn't be totally helpless right now, able to do nothing but watch as Fourth Brother Feng dies an unnatural death."

Qiao Feng, seeing how Bao Butong and the short elder were evenly matched, knew that victory could not be determined for some time. He said to the long armed elder, "Elder Chen, please go ahead and cure Mr. Feng!" The long-armed elder was startled. He said, "Chief, this fellow was extremely impolite and his martial arts is not weak. If I rescue him, there'll be no end of trouble in the future." Qiao Feng nodded. "What you say is true. But for us to kill a master's subordinates before even meeting him might be construed as us bullying the weak. It's best for us to firmly plant ourselves on the moral high ground." Elder Chen angrily said, "Vice-chief Ma was clearly killed by that brat from the Murong family. We're here to take revenge, not to engage in moral or righteous posturing." A look of slight displeasure appeared on Qiao Feng's face. "Go and cure his poison first. It won't be too late for us to slowly discuss other things later."

Although Elder Chen was extremely unwilling to do this, in the end, he did not dare to disobey his chief's orders. He said, "Yes sir." From within his robes, he withdrew a small bottle. Taking a few steps forward, he said to Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, "My chief puts benevolence and righteousness ahead of all other things. This is the antidote. Take it!"

Ah Bi was overjoyed. She immediately rushed forward to accept the antidote, then very respectfully curtsied to Qiao Feng and paid her respects to Elder Chen as well. "Thank you, Chief Qiao. Thank you, Elder Chen." As she took the antidote, she asked, "Elder, if I might ask, how should the antidote be applied?" Elder Chen replied, "After drawing out the poison in the wound, apply the antidote directly to the wound." After pausing for a moment, he said, "If the venom

isn't totally drawn out, this medicine will do more harm than good. You should be aware of this." Ah Bi replied, "Understood!" Rushing back to Feng Bo'e's side, she lifted up her arm and was about to press her open mouth against the wound and suck out the venom.

Elder Chen loudly shouted, "Hold!" Ah Bi was stunned. "What is it?" Elder Chen said, "Females cannot draw the poison out!" Ah Bi's face reddened slightly. "What's wrong with females?" Elder Chen replied, "This poison has a cold Yin nature. Females are Yin by nature. To add even more Yin would be to increase the toxicity of this venom."

Ah Bi, Ah Zhu, and Wang Yuyan all half-believed, half-doubted him. Although they felt his words were very strange, they weren't totally unreasonable. If he was telling the truth, then them drawing out the venom would be actually making things worse. On their side, the only man left was Bao Butong, but he was currently embroiled in a huge battle with the short elder. The shadow of the elder's staff flashed about, and Bao Butong's palms fluttered about here and there. It would be difficult for the battle to come to an end soon. Ah Zhu called out, "Third Brother, stop fighting for now! First come and help rescue fourth brother!"

There was only a hairs breadth of difference between Bao Butong's strength and that of the short elder. Even if he wanted to retreat and disengage, it wasn't something he could do very quickly. When experts competed in martial arts, they risked their lives with every stroke. If someone could advance and retreat freely, they would be able to take their opponent's life easily. How could it be so easy for him to charge or disengage? Hearing Ah Zhu's call, Bao Butong knew that there was a change in Feng Bo'e's condition. Growing anxious, he launched several powerful attacks in a row, hoping to be able to shake the short elder off.

By now, the short elder had already fought with Bao Butong for over a hundred strokes. Although they were evenly matched, he himself was wielding a large, long, and

powerful weapon, whereas Bao Butong was empty handed. Thus, superiority and inferiority had already been determined. Brandishing his steel staff, the short elder had launched many attacks in succession against Bao Butong, but Bao Butong had been able to dissolve all of them. He knew that most likely, if this battle were to continue, he would lose, not win. Seeing how ferocious Bao Butong's attacks became, he thought that Bao Butong was trying to vanquish him and immediately used all of his energy to counterattack. These four elders of the Beggars' Clan each had their own unique accomplishments in martial arts. Zhu Baokun and Sima Lin of the Qingcheng sect, along with Yao Bodang of the Qin family stronghold, were all dispatched by Bao Butong in a laughably easy manner, but this short elder really was difficult to deal with. Although Bao Butong had the advantage, for him to actually defeat his opponent by one stance or half a stroke would depend on his opponent's strength, and clearly the short elder possessed strong stamina.

Qiao Feng saw that Wang Yuyan and the other two girls looked very frightened. He knew that it was true that females cannot draw out this poison, and also knew how lethal the multicolored scorpion's venom was. He knew that if he ordered his subordinates to launch an attack, even if the situation was a hundred times more dangerous than it was today, not a single person would dare to complain. But no matter what, he could not give out the order for one of his subordinates to risk his own life to save an enemy. He immediately said, "I will come and draw out his poison myself." As he spoke, he walked towards Feng Bo'e.

As soon as he saw the anxious look on Wang Yuyan's face, Duan Yu had the intention of helping Feng Bo'e draw out the poison. Only, Qiao Feng was now his sworn brother, and it would be totally improper for him to go and help his sworn brother's enemy thusly. Although Qiao Feng had ordered Elder Chen to provide the antidote, Duan Yu didn't know if

he was sincere in doing so or not. Seeing as how Qiao Feng was personally walking towards Feng Bo'e and intended to draw out the poison himself, Duan Yu hurriedly said, "Elder Brother, let me do it instead." Rushing forward, he immediately executed the 'Graceful Steps Upon the Waves'. With a swaying flicker, he rushed in front of Qiao Feng. Grabbing Feng Bo'e's upper arm, he pressed his mouth against the wound and began drawing the poison out.

At this point in time, Feng Bo'e's arm had already turned totally black. His eyes were wide open; the flesh on his face had become so rigid that he couldn't even close them. After drawing out a mouthful of poisoned blood, Duan Yu spat it out on the ground. The poisoned blood was as black as ink. Everyone who saw it was astonished. Just as Duan Yu was about to draw out more poison, more black blood began to flow from the wound. Startled, Duan Yu thought to himself, "It'd be best if I let this poisoned blood flow out first." He did not know that this was because he had once ingested the 'King of Ten Thousand Poisons', the Cinnabar Toad, which could conquer all venoms. The venom of the multicolored scorpion was far inferior to it. As soon as they touched, the venom began to flow out. Feng Bo'e's body suddenly came to life, and he said, "Many thanks!"

Ah Zhu and the rest were all overjoyed. Ah Bi said, "Fourth Brother, you can speak again!" The flow of black blood slowly lessened, beginning to turn purple. After the purple blood flowed for a bit longer, the blood turned a scarlet red. Ah Bi hurriedly applied the antidote to his arm, and Bao Butong unsealed his acupoints. In a short period of time, Feng Bo'e's arm, previously swollen grotesquely, looked normal again, and he had no problems speaking or moving.

Feng Bo'e bowed deeply towards Duan Yu. "Thank you for saving my life." Duan Yu hurriedly returned the courtesy, saying, "There's no need to be so courteous about such a trifling matter." Feng Bo'e grinned. "My life might be a

trifling matter to you, but it's a rather important matter to me." Taking the small antidote bottle from Ah Zhu, he tossed it towards Elder Chen, saying, "I'm giving your antidote back to you!" Turning towards Qiao Feng, Feng Bo'e cupped his fists. "Chief Qiao, you are exceptionally benevolent and righteous. You are worthy of being the leader of the largest clan in the world. I, Feng Bo'e, admire you very much!" Qiao Feng cupped his fists in return. "You are too kind."

Feng Bo'e picked up his broadsword, then pointed with his left arm towards Elder Chen. "Today, I was defeated by you. I, Feng Bo'e, freely admit my inferiority! Next time we meet, let's fight again! But this today, we're not fighting anymore." Elder Chen smiled. "I will naturally keep you company next time." Slanting his body, Feng Bo'e called out towards the elder wielding a mace, "I'd like to go a few rounds with you, sir!" Ah Zhu and Ah Bi were astonished. They called out, "Fourth Brother, no! Your body isn't fully recovered yet!" Feng Bo'e replied, "Not getting into a fight when one's available? That's not in keeping with my character!" Brandishing his knife, he charged at the mace-wielding elder.

The mace-wielding elder had white eyebrows and a white beard. He had become famous decades ago. What type of person hadn't he met? But he couldn't help but be struck dumb with amazement as he saw Feng Bo'e vigorously charging towards him, just moments after being brought back from the brink of death. Originally, there were many transformations and changes in his mace techniques. Aside from beating, striking, sweeping, and piercing techniques, he also had bizarre techniques to lock up an enemy's weapons. But now, feeling a bit nervous, his skill decreased by a significant degree and all he could do was to ward off Feng Bo'e's attacks, without being able to counterattack at all.

Qiao Feng frowned slightly. "This Feng fellow really doesn't know what's good for him. Brother Duan just saved

his life. How could he so indiscriminately and rashly charge off into battle?"

Bao Butong and Feng Bo'e both slowly gained the upper hand in their battles. However, it would still take some time for victory or defeat to be determined. When experts were competing against each other, the situation could change in the blink of an eye. It only took one particularly brilliant stroke or the slightest negligence for a losing position to be turned into an equal one. None of the four dared to be the least bit negligent, and all of the onlookers watched raptly.

Duan Yu suddenly heard the sound of many people rushing this way from the east, followed by people coming from the north. Duan Yu said to Qiao Feng in a low voice, "Elder Brother, people are coming." Qiao Feng also had heard the sounds long ago, and nodded. He thought to himself, "Most likely, other forces under Young Master Murong's command have come. So this Bao fellow and Feng fellow arrived first to keep us entangled here while they prepared a large group of men to attack us." He prepared to give a secret command, ordering the ordinary members of the clan to head west and individually disappear off to the south while the four elders, Hall-master Jiang, and himself would secure the rear. But suddenly, he heard footsteps coming from the west and the south as well. They had been totally surrounded by enemies.

Qiao Feng said in a low voice, "Hall-master Jiang, the enemy force is weakest to the south. Later, when I give the hand signal, immediately order all of our brothers to retreat to the south." Hall-master Jiang replied, "Yes sir!"

Just at this moment, fifty or sixty people burst in from the east. All of them wore ragged clothes, had uncombed hair, and either wielded weapons or broken bowls and bamboo staffs. All of them were members of the Beggars' Clan. Next, eighty or so disciples of the Beggars' Clan appeared from the north. All of them had very serious expressions on their face, and when they saw Qiao Feng, they didn't pay him any

courtesies at all. Instead, they seemed to be faintly hostile towards him.

Bao Butong and Feng Bo'e, seeing so many disciples of the Beggars' Clan suddenly appear, were both alarmed. They thought to themselves, "How can we rescue Miss Wang, Ah Zu, and Ah Bi from this situation?"

However, the person who was most astonished of all was Qiao Feng. These were all members of his clan, and normally would be extremely respectful towards him. If they saw him from afar, they would immediately rush forward to pay their respects. How could it be that today, they wouldn't even let out a call of 'Chief'? Just as he was feeling confused, he saw that dozens of additional clan members had rushed here from the west and the south. In a short period of time, the apricot forest was crammed with people. However, aside from the four elders and Hall-master Jiang, who had arrived earlier, none of the other leaders of the Beggars' Clan were present. Qiao Feng was more and more astonished. Slowly, cold sweat began to form on his palms. He had never been shocked than he was today, not even when he was facing the toughest of enemies. He could only think to himself, "Can it be that there has been a riot or rebellion within our ranks? Can it be that the skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elders, along with the various hall-masters, have all been murdered?" But with Bao Butong and Feng Bo'e still fighting with the two elders, and Wang Yuyan and the other two girls still watching, he could not give voice to his thoughts.

Elder Chen suddenly shouted in a loud voice, "Form the 'Dog Beating Formation!'" From each direction, ten or twenty Beggars' Clan disciples rushed forwards, all wielding weapons, surrounding Bao Butong and Feng Bo'e.

Bao Butong saw that in the blink of an eye, the Beggars' Clan had formed a battle array against them. He knew that although he himself might be able to just barely escape, Feng Bo'e had been greatly exhausted by his battle with the

poison and would suffer severe injuries while doing so. It would be harder than hard to rescue Wang Yuyan and the other girls. When faced with a situation like this, he really had no other options but to throw up his hands and admit defeat. For him to admit defeat when so badly outnumbered would not cause any harm to his reputation at all. But Bao Butong had a stubborn, pigheaded nature. He would intentionally do the opposite of what normal people considered to be natural. In addition, Feng Bo'e was a person who loved fighting more than his own life. As long as there was an opportunity to fight, regardless of whether he would win or lose, whether he would live or die, or whether the cause was just or unjust, he would fight to the very end. Victory and defeat had already been determined, but Bao Butong and Feng Bo'e continued to fight hard, not yielding in the slightest.

Wang Yuyan cried out, "Third Brother Bao, Fourth Brother Feng! This won't work! The two of you aren't capable of defeating this 'Dog Beating Formation'! It's best if you stop fighting now!"

Feng Bo'e replied, "Lemme fight a bit longer! When I am totally helpless, I'll stop fighting!" As he spoke, his attention was diverted and the white-haired elder landed a hit on his shoulder with his mace. The spikes on the mace tore a bloody wound in his shoulder. Feng Bo'e cursed, "Your grandmother's! What a nasty stroke!" He launched three swishing suicidal attacks, as though he wanted nothing more but to die with his opponent. The white haired elder thought to himself, "It isn't as though the two of us have irreconcilable differences. Why must you go all out like that?" He immediately tightened his defenses, no longer attacking.

The long-armed elder began to sing, "Brothers from the south, come beg for food! Ai-yo-ai-yo-yo..." Although he was singing a begging song, what he actually was doing was issuing out combat orders. The tens of beggars at the south

all raised their weapons. As soon as the elder stopped singing, they would charge forwards. Qiao Feng knew that once the 'Dog Beating Formation' was launched, the beggars in the formation would not stop until the enemy had been wounded and killed. He was unwilling to create a deep grudge with Gusu's Murong family before he had fully investigated the situation. He immediately waved his left hand and shouted, "Wait!" His shadow swaying, he arrived before Feng Bo'e, launching a clawing attack towards his face....

Feng Bo'e dodged to the right, but Qiao Feng launched an attack with his right hand, seizing him by the wrist and disarming him. Wang Yuyan cried out, "This is a stroke from the 'Dragon Claw Hand' named the 'Three Pearl-Snatching Strokes'!"

Then she cried out, "Third Brother Bao, his left elbow will collide with your chest, then his right hand will chop at your upper waist, and his left hand will seize your 'Qihu' acupoint. This is a 'Dragon Claw Hand' stroke known as 'Copious Amounts of Rain'.

Just as Wang Yuyan said, 'his left elbow will collide with your chest', Qiao Feng's left elbow really did strike out and collide with Bao Butong's chest. As Wang Yuyan said, 'his right hand will chop at your upper waist', Qiao Feng's right hand really did chop at his upper waist. He acted at exactly the same moment that she spoke; the synchronicity was so perfect that it couldn't even have been trained for. Just as Wang Yuyan said the third sentence, Qiao Feng's fingers formed a hook and seized Bao Butong's 'Qihu' acupoint.

Bao Butong felt his entire body go limp, rendering him incapable of movement. He indignantly said, "What a nice 'Copious Amounts of Rain'! Little Sister, what's the point of you telling me about it after the fact? If you told me a bit earlier, I could've prepared for it!" Wang Yuyan apologized, "He's simply too powerful. When he executes his attacks, he doesn't reveal any hints in advance, and I wasn't able to

realize what he was about to do. I'm really sorry." Bao Butong replied, "What's this 'really sorry, really sorry' nonsense? Today, we lost this fight and have shamed the Basin of the Swallows!" Turning his head, he saw that Feng Bo'e was standing straight and stiff. When Qiao Feng took away his weapon, he had also sealed his acupoints. Otherwise, how could he simply stand there without fighting so obediently?

Elder Chen, seeing how his chief had already subdued Feng Bo'e and Bao Butong, stopped singing the song without finishing it. The four elders and various experts of the clan, seeing how Qiao Feng had immediately subdued those two as soon as he acted with such unimaginably wonderful skill, all felt great admiration for him in their heart.

Qiao Feng unsealed Bao Butong's 'Qihu' acupoint, then gently tapped Feng Bo'e on the shoulder, unsealing his sealed acupoint as well before saying, "The two of you, feel free to leave."

Even if Bao Butong was more stubborn than he already was, he knew that the gap between his level of martial arts and that of his opponent was simply far too wide. Even if the Beggars' Clan didn't have the 'Dog Beating Formation' or the four elders, Qiao Feng would still easily overcome him. At this point in time, if he said anything at all, he would only lose more face. Without saying a single word, he immediately returned to Wang Yuyan's side.

Feng Bo'e, on the other hand, spoke. "Chief Qiao, I am definitely inferior to you in martial arts. But I'm not happy with how you beat me using that technique earlier. You caught me a bit off guard." Qiao Feng replied, "True. I did catch you off guard. Let's go a few more stances, shall we? I'll receive some strokes from your broadsword." As soon as he finished speaking, he lifted up his hand, making a snatching motion mid-air. A current of air suddenly agitated the broadsword lying on the floor, causing the broadsword to

actually jump up and leap into his hand. With a flick of his finger, Qiao Feng spun the broadsword around, then presented it to Feng Bo'e.

Feng Bo'e immediately froze in utter shock. In a quivering voice, he said, "This...this is the 'Dragon Capturing Art'? Someone exists who is actually...actually able to use this incredible technique?"

Qiao Feng smiled. "My proficiency in the skill is very basic. Please don't laugh at me." As he spoke, he glanced at Wang Yuyan. Earlier, when Wang Yuyan had recognized him using 'Copious Amounts of Rain', she had predicted with incredible foresight, as though she were a prophet. This had greatly astonished him. At this moment, he was curious as to how this young maiden who had a thorough knowledge of martial arts would comment on his execution of the 'Dragon Capturing Art'.

Strangely, Wang Yuyan didn't say a single word. It seemed as though she hadn't even seen Qiao Feng's outstanding display. As it turned out, she was lost in thought. "Chief Qiao's martial arts skill is so incredible. My cousin shares an equal amount of fame with him, and everyone in the martial world knows the saying, 'Northern Qiao Feng, Southern Murong'. But...but my cousin's proficiency in martial arts, how can it...how can it..."

Feng Bo'e shook his head. "I can't beat you. The difference between our respective skill levels is too great. There's no fun in fighting you. Chief Qiao, farewell!" Although he had just been defeated, he didn't look crestfallen at all. The saying, 'Victory is joyful, but defeat is delightful as well' applied to him. The only thing he wanted to do was fight. The more exciting the battle became, the happier he was. He didn't care at all about victory or defeat. He could honestly be described as someone who was deeply in tune with the 'Way of Battle'.

After saluting Qiao Feng, he said to Bao Butong, "Third Brother, I hear that the young master went to Shaolin.

There're a lot of people there. There must be a lot of fights willing to happen as well! I'm going to go stir up some trouble! You guys take your time." The only thing he was afraid of was missing half a chance to get into a fight. Without even waiting for Bao Butong to respond, he immediately ran off.

Bao Butong said, "Let's go, let's go! As my skill is inferior to others, I have lost all face! Even if I practiced for ten more years, I would still be totally defeated. I might as well stop now, and come to a rest!" He sang the words in a loud voice as he swaggered off. Even in defeat, he looked carefree and unrestrained.

Wang Yuyan said to Ah Zhu and Ah Bi, "Third Brother and Fourth Brother have both left. Where shall we go to find...to find him?" Ah Zhu lowered her head. "The Beggars' Clan needs to discuss some serious matters here. Let's go back to Wuxi and discuss things there." Turning her head towards Qiao Feng, she said, "Chief Qiao, the three of us are leaving now!" Qiao Feng nodded. "Ladies, at your leisure."

From within the group of beggars to the east, walked out a middle-aged beggar with an elegant, refined face. "Chief, we haven't yet avenged the murder of Vice-Chief Ma. How can you so casually let our enemies leave?" These words seemed on the surface to be very courteous, but the person appeared very overbearing and aggressive, not acting as though he were a subordinate at all.

Qiao Feng replied, "We came to Jiangnan for the purpose of avenging the death of Vice-Chief Ma. But over the past few days, I have done some investigating and now believe that he was not necessarily slain by Young Master Murong."

The middle-aged beggar was named Quan Guanqing. He was nicknamed the 'Fully Learned Scholar'. He was wise and full of stratagems, and possessed a high level of martial arts as well. Within the clan, he was an eight-bagged hall-master whose position was inferior only to the six elder's

themselves. He was in charge of the 'Hall of Great Wisdom'. He asked, "Chief, what makes you say that?"

Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi were just about to leave, but upon hearing someone in the Beggars' Clan bring up Murong Fu, they immediately went to one side and quietly listened, out of their love and solicitude for him.

Qiao Feng replied, "It is based purely on my own conjecture. I cannot provide any proof." Quan Guanqing said, "What conjectures do you have, Chief? Your subordinate would like to hear them." Qiao Feng replied, "When I was in Luoyang and heard that Second Brother Ma died to the 'Throat Locking Technique', I suddenly thought of Gusu's Murong family, famous for 'using an opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.' I believed that Second Brother Ma had unequaled proficiency in the 'Throat Locking Technique', and that aside from Gusu's Murong family, no one is capable of using Second Brother Ma's own ultimate technique against him." Quan Guanqing said, "Correct." Qiao Feng said, "But over the past few days, more and more I have begun to think that our initial judgment might not be correct. It's possible that there are other complications to this matter." Quan Guanqing said, "All of the brothers here are willing to listen to your thoughts and help you clarify them."

Qiao Feng felt that his words seemed to spring from an evil intention, and also noticed that all of the members present had a strange look on their faces. Some tremendous unforeseen event must have occurred within the clan, and he asked, "Where is the skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elder?" Quan Guanqing replied, "Your subordinate has not seen either of the two elders today." Qiao Feng then asked, "And where are the hall-masters of the 'Great Benevolence', 'Great Trustworthiness', 'Great Valor', and 'Great Courtesy' halls?" Quan Guanqing turned and looked at a seven-bagged disciple who stood towards the northwest

and asked, "Zhang Quanxiang, where is your hall-master?" The seven-bagged disciple replied, "Um...um...I don't know."

Qiao Feng always knew that Quan Guanqing, the hall-master of the 'Hall of Great Wisdom', was a person who utilized careful planning. He was a very capable and experienced person, and was originally one of his own exceptionally competent personal subordinates. But now that he was conspiring to cause upheaval, he became an exceptionally dangerous enemy. Seeing a look of shame on that seven-bagged disciple, Zhang Quanxiang, how he was unwilling to meet his own gaze, and hearing how he hemmed and hawed, Qiao Feng shouted out, "Zhang Quanxiang! You murdered the master of your hall. Right?!" Zhang Quanxiang was shocked. He hurriedly said, "I didn't, I didn't! Hall-master Fang is safe and sound in that place. He isn't dead, he isn't dead! This...this has nothing to do with me. I didn't do it!" Qiao Feng said in a severe voice, "Then who did it?" This sentence was not said particularly loudly, but it was filled with dignity and majesty. Zhang Quanxiang couldn't help but begin to tremble from head to foot, and his gaze turned towards Quan Guanqing.

Qiao Feng realized that the revolt had already come to pass. Even if the skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elder had not been slain, they were definitely in critical, life-and-death danger. He had to act quickly, before the opportunity faded away. Letting out a long sigh, he turned and asked the four elders, "Four Elders, what exactly has happened?"

The four elders looked at each other, each of them hoping that another person would be the first to speak. Upon seeing this, Qiao Feng knew that the four elders were also complicit in whatever had happened. Smiling slightly, he said, "Within our clan, from myself on down, everyone highly values the code of brotherhood..." As he said this, he suddenly took two steps backwards. Each step he took was over three meters long; other people couldn't move so quickly even if while

walking forwards, and their steps would not be as large. After taking those two backward steps, he was within one meter of Quan Guanqing. Without turning around, he shot both hands backwards and seized Quan Guanqing's 'Zhongting' and 'Jiuyi' acupoints, located on his chest.

Qiao Feng exerted his internal energy through his hands, sending it through Quan Guanqing's captured acupoints and into his meridians, where it surged to the 'Zhongwei' and 'Yangtai' acupoints near his kneejoints. Feeling his legs go soft, Quan Guanqing couldn't help but fall to his knees.

Quan Guanqing possessed outstanding martial arts ability, and was not at all inferior to the four elders. How could it be that he was subdued in but a single stroke, without even having the chance to retaliate? Everyone present turned pale. They were all astonished and fearful, uncertain as to how to proceed.

Qiao Feng had surmised that Quan Guanqing must be the principal troublemaker in this revolt. Qiao Feng knew that if he did not subdue him immediately, there would be no end of problems. Even if he was able to suppress the traitors, it would be difficult to avoid a bloody, fratricidal civil war within the clan itself. While about to face tough opponents, how could the Beggars' Clan inflict wounds on itself? He saw that of the people present, everyone aside from the hall-master of the 'Great Righteousness' seemed to have been deluded and misled by Quan Guanqing. If they began to fight each other, things would become very difficult to handle. Thus, he intentionally turned around to ask a question from the four elders and, while Quan Guanqing was not on his guard, suddenly retreated and sealed his acupoints. Outwardly, this may have appeared as a simple, uninterrupted action, like a hare rearing its head and a hawk descending to slay it, but in actuality Qiao Feng had to draw upon everyone he had ever learned to carry it out. If Qiao Feng's backwards strikes were off-target even slightly, even though he would have been able to subdue Quan Guanqing,

he wouldn't have had the chance to send his internal energy to Quan Guanqing's kneejoints, and Quan Guanqing's co-conspirators might have rushed forward to aid him, forcing a battle. But with Quan Guanqing falling to his knees, everyone present thought that he was actually surrendering to Qiao Feng, and thus no one dared to make any rash moves.

Qiao Feng turned around. He lightly clapped Quan Guanqing on the shoulder and said, "Since you admit your mistake, there's no need for you to kneel down. However, I cannot fail to mete out punishment to you for going against your superiors. We'll slowly discuss how to handle this." With a light tap of his elbow, he sealed Quan Guanqing's 'Mute' acupoint, preventing him from speaking.

Qiao Feng knew that Quan Guanqing was a superb orator. If he was given a chance to speak and incite the people present, it would cause many problems. This was a moment of great crisis, and thus he had to use drastic measures to deal with it. He had subdued Quan Guanqing and forced him to his knees. Now, he turned to Zhang Quanxiang and loudly said, "Lead Hall-master Jiang of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness' to invite the skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elder here. If you obediently listen to my commands, your own offenses will be lessened. Everyone else must immediately sit down. Without my permission, none of you are allowed to rise!"

Zhang Quanxiang was both shocked and overjoyed. He repeatedly agreed, "Yes! Yes!"

Hall-master Jiang of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness' was not part of this revolt. When he saw how Quan Guanqing and the others dared to stage an armed rebellion against their superiors, he was filled with so much rage that his face was swollen red. He breathed heavily and furiously. Only now, upon hearing Qiao Feng order him to go rescue the two elders, did he calm down slightly. He said to the twenty or so members of his hall, "Our clan has unfortunately fallen

victim to turmoil. Now is the time when all of us must exert all our efforts to repay our chief's benevolence. Everyone must protect the chief and obey all his commands!" He was afraid that the four elders would, once he left, launch an attack against Qiao Feng. Although the people of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness' were far outnumbered by the traitors, the chief couldn't be allowed to face the traitors all alone.

But Qiao Feng said, "No! Brother Jiang, take all of the brothers within your hall with you. Nothing can go wrong on this critical mission of saving the two elders." Not daring to disobey him, Hall-master Jiang replied, "Yes sir!" Then he said, "Chief, please be careful. I will come back as soon as possible." Smiling, Qiao Feng said, "Everyone here is a brother with whom I have gone through life-and-death experiences with. It's just that they have some temporary complaints. It is no big deal. Set your mind at rest and go." Then he added, "Send someone to inform the Western Xia's 'League of Elites' that our meeting at Mt. Hui must be pushed back by seven days." Hall-master Jiang respectfully bowed, then left with all of his subordinates.

Although Qiao Feng spoke very casually, he was actually very anxious. With the members of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness' having departed, aside from Duan Yu and the three girls, each and every one of the two hundred plus people within the apricot forest had participated in this revolt. It would only take one person taking command for all of them to suddenly move against him, making the situation very hard to deal with. Staring at everyone, he saw that there was a look of extremely awkward embarrassment on all of their faces. Some tried to put on a pretense of calmness, while others let their fear show on their faces. But still others seemed itchy and eager to give battle, appearing to be ready to take reckless actions. None of the two hundred people surrounding him spoke, but it was clear that if someone did, there would immediately be great chaos.

By this time, the sky had slowly become black, as dusk enveloped the world. A mist arose within the apricot forest, billowing hither and to. Qiao Feng thought to himself, "At this time, I need to calm everyone down. The best thing to do would be to change their current state of mind. Once the skill-instructing elder and the rest come, everything will be solved." Glancing at Duan Yu, he said, "Brothers, a joyous thing has happened to me today. I've made a new friend. This is brother Duan, Duan Yu. The two of us got along perfectly, and I have become sworn brothers with him."

Upon hearing that this bookworm had become sworn brothers with the chief of the Beggars' Clan, Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi were all astonished.

Qiao Feng continued, "Brother, let me introduce to you some of the most important people in my clan." He led Duan Yu to the white-haired elder who wielded the spiked mace. "This is Elder Song. He is a senior statesman of our clan, whom everyone respects. When his spiked mace freely roamed across the martial world, you, brother, weren't even born yet." Duan Yu said, "Pleased to meet you, pleased to meet you. For me to have the good fortune of meeting an eminent, virtuous person is a true blessing." As he spoke, he cupped his fist and saluted the elder. Elder Song forced himself to return the courtesy.

Next, Qiao Feng led Duan Yu to stand before the short and stout elder who wielded the steel staff. "Elder Xi is an expert of our sect who specializes in armed combat. Ten or so years ago, I often sought advice from him regarding martial arts. The relationship between us can be characterized as half that of a master-disciple relationship, and half that of a deep friendship. The ties of affection that bind us are deep and unabiding." Duan Yu said, "Just earlier, I watched Elder Xi fight with that other fellow. He really is superb at martial arts. Admirable, admirable." Elder Xi had a straightforward and frank disposition. Upon hearing how highly Qiao Feng esteemed their friendship, and how Qiao

Feng had never forgotten that Elder Xi had once instructed him, he himself couldn't help but feel greatly ashamed for listening to and stupidly believing Quan Guanqing's words.

After Qiao Feng had introduced Elders Xi and Chen, he was about to introduce Duan Yu to the red-faced Elder Wu, who wielded the demon-headed sabre, when suddenly he heard the sound of many footsteps rush in his direction from the northeast. There was a great deal of noise, and some people were repeatedly calling out, "How is the chief? Where are those traitors?" Others were saying, "We fell for their tricks and were imprisoned by them! I'm so angry." All the voices came together in a chaotic roar.

Qiao Feng was overjoyed, but did not want to be discourteous and risk making Elder Wu unhappy. He introduced Duan Yu to Elder Wu and explained Elder Wu's status and great fame before turning around. As he did, he saw that the skill-instructing elder, law-enforcing elder, and the hall-masters of the 'Great Benevolence', 'Great Valor', 'Great Courtesy', and 'Great Trustworthiness' halls had all arrived, along with a large group of their subordinates. All of them had many things they wanted to say, but in front of their chief, none of them dared to speak too rashly.

Qiao Feng said, "Everyone, please be seated. I have some things I want to say." They all answered in unison, "Yes sir!" Each of them seated themselves in accordance to their own rank and station. To Duan Yu's eyes, it seemed as though everyone was just scrambling about for a seat, but in actuality, there was a regimented order and method to their seating arrangements.

Seeing how everyone seated themselves according to regulations, Qiao Feng felt thirty percent relieved. Smiling, he said, "It is the good fortune of our clan that the people of the martial world hold us in high esteem, so as to allow us to be the largest clan in the world for over a century. With so many people in our clan, it's natural that we have differing opinions and feelings. All we need to do is clearly explain

the situation and politely discuss our differences. Everyone here is the closest of brothers and friends to everyone else. There's no need for us to take any temporary personal disputes too seriously." When he said these words, a very kind and gentle look was on his face. He had long since decided to handle this situation peacefully and cause this great disaster to totally disappear. No matter what, he could not allow the brothers of the Beggars' Clan to kill and slaughter each other.

As everyone heard his words, the dangerous, explosive air actually did diminish a bit.

An old, yellow-faced beggar seated to Qiao Feng's right rose to his feet. He said, "Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu. Might I ask, why is it that you ordered for us to be imprisoned within a small boat on Lake Taihu?" This was the law-enforcing elder. His name was Bai Shijing. He had always been incorruptible and impartial, and whenever anyone within the clan who had broken its rules saw him, they all became very nervous, no matter what their rank or station.

Of the four elders, Elder Song was the oldest, and so he was something of their de-facto leader. His face flushed red. Coughing, he said, "This...this...um...we are all old friends who have gone through many trials and tribulations together over the years. Naturally, we had no ill intentions towards you...Bai...law-enforcing Elder Bai, please give me some face and don't hold it against me."

Everyone, upon hearing his words, thought that he was becoming old and muddleheaded. To revolt against one's leaders was an extremely serious offense. How could it be simply waved off with the words, 'please give me some face and don't hold it against me'?

Bai Shijing replied, "Elder Song, you say that you had no ill intentions, but that is not the case. The skill-instructing elder and I, along with our brothers, were all imprisoned on three boats and set adrift in the middle of the lake. The

boats were filled with firewood, sulfur, and saltpeter. We were told that if we tried to escape, the boats would immediately be set aflame. Elder Song, are you telling me that this is not an example of ill intentions?" Elder Song said, "This...this, well, this really was way too excessive. We're all one big family and are like brothers to each other. How can we be so reckless and rough? In the future, how can we face each other? This...isn't this humiliating?" These last few sentences were directed towards Elder Chen.

Pointing to a man, Bai Shijing said in a fearsome voice, "You tricked us aboard the ship by telling us it was the chief's command. Tell me, what is the penalty for falsifying the chief's orders?" The man was so terrified, his entire body was quivering. In a trembling voice, he said, "My station is humble and low. How could I dare commit such a rebellious act? It was all...it was all..." His eyes looked towards Quan Guanqing, and his meaning was clear. He was saying, 'it was all due to my hall-master, who ordered me to lie to you.' But, as one of Quan Guanqing's subordinates, he didn't dare to openly accuse him. Bai Shijing replied, "It was the orders of Hall-master Quan, right?" The man hung his head, not daring to either say yes or say no. Bai Shijing said, "When Hall-master Quan ordered you to lie to me and tell me that our chief wanted me to get on this boat, did you know that this order was false?" Instantly, all the blood drained away from that man's face, and he didn't dare to utter a sound.

Bai Shijing laughed grimly. "Li Chunlai, you've always been a tough man who has never been afraid to admit to your actions. Am I right? As a man, if you had the guts to do something, how can you not have the guts to admit to it?" Suddenly, a firm, unyielding look appeared on Li Chunlai's face. Puffing out his chest, he said in a clear voice, "Elder Bai, your words are correct! I, Li Chunlai, have acted wrongly. Regardless of whether I am to be killed or dismembered, I await your orders! If I so much as wrinkle my forehead when it happens, then you can say I'm not a real man! When I

gave you the 'orders' from the chief, I knew very well that the orders were false."

Bai Shijing asked, "Did the chief wrong you? Was it I who wronged you?" Li Chunlai replied, "Neither is true. The chief has always acted righteously and loyally by me, and you, Elder Bai, are just and impartial. No one can say differently." Bai Shijing said in a severe voice, "Then what is the meaning behind all this? What is the reason for your actions?" Li Chunlai glanced at the kneeling Quan Guanqing, then glanced at Qiao Feng. He loudly said, "I broke our clan's regulations and deserve death. But I do not dare give the reason for my actions." He flipped his wrist, and a bright flash of steel could be seen. With a puffing sound, he stabbed himself in the heart. His movements were very quick, and his dagger was aimed at his own heart. As the dagger pierced into his heart, he immediately died.

All the beggars present let out a loud cry of shock, yet all of them remained seated. None of them moved.

Bai Shijing didn't even bat an eye. He said, "You knew that the order was false, and yet instead of reporting this to the chief, you lied to me. You deserved to be put to death." Turning towards the skill-instructing elder, he said, "Brother Xiang, which person tricked you into going on the boat?"

Suddenly, a person jumped to his feet and quickly tried to run away from the apricot forest.

Chapter 15: Within the Apricot Forest, Discussing One's True History

Fan translation by Ren Wo Xing and tigergee2329 [Second
Edition]

www.spcnet.tv

Translated by Ren Wo Xing

This person was carrying five cloth bags on his back; he was a five-bagged disciple of the Beggars' Clan. He ran away extremely frantically. It was obvious that he was the one who transmitted the false order and tricked Elder Xiang aboard the boat. The skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elder each let out a sigh, not saying a word. Suddenly, with the flicker of a shadow, someone rushed forward and blocked the fleeing five-bagged beggar. This person's face was red and vigorous, and he wielded a demon-headed sabre. It was Elder Wu. In a fierce voice, he said, "Liu Zhuzhuang, why are you running away?" The five-bagged beggar said in a trembling voice, "I...I...I..." He said the word 'I' six or seven times, unable to say anything else.

Elder Wu said, "As we are disciples of the Beggars' Clan, we must follow our ancestor's laws. Right is right, and wrong is wrong. When a real man acts, he must be willing to bear the consequences." Turning his head, he said to Qiao Feng, "Chief Qiao, all of us met together and decided to oust you from your position as chief. Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu all agreed to this. We were afraid that the skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elder would not allow it, and thus devised a way to imprison them. In doing so, we were considering the greater good of our clan and couldn't help but act in such a way. Today, we lost the momentum and you have seized the advantage. You can just go ahead and deal with us as you see fit! I, Wu Changfeng, have been in the Beggars' Clan for over thirty years. Everyone knows that I'm

not the sort of person to cravenly fear death!” As he spoke, he hurled his demon-headed sabre far away, then folded his arms in front of his chest, a totally fearless look on his face.

When he clearly explained how their plot was to ‘oust the chief’, everyone within the clan was shocked. Although each of the plotters was well aware of what they were trying to do, none of them dared to openly say it. Wu Changfeng was the first person to state it openly and clearly.

The law-enforcing elder, Bai Shijing, said in a clear voice, “Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu betrayed the chief and have broken the cardinal rule of the clan. Law-enforcing disciples, take them into custody and bind them!” The law-enforcing disciples under his command took some cow-sinew ropes and first bound Elder Wu. Elder Wu continued to smile, not resisting in the slightest. Next, elders Song and Xi also threw away their weapons, allowing themselves to be bound as well.

Elder Chen had an extremely ugly look on his face. He repeatedly muttered, “Cowards. Cowards! If we all had charged him, we wouldn’t necessarily have lost, but everyone was afraid of Qiao Feng.” These words were very true. When Quan Guanqing had been subdued, if the rebels had immediately launched an attack, Qiao Feng would have been hopelessly outnumbered and in dire straits. Even after the skill-instructing elder, law-enforcing elder, and the hall-masters of the ‘Great Benevolence’, ‘Great Righteousness’, ‘Great Trustworthiness’, and ‘Great Loyalty’ halls arrived, the rebels still outnumbered the loyal forces. But with Qiao Feng standing there in such an awe-inspiring manner, no one dared to make a move. Consequently, the opportunity had been lost and now all of them were being bound. After Elders Song, Xi, and Wu had been bound, even if Elder Chen was still determined to fight, he would be fighting alone. Letting out a sigh, he threw away his gunnysack and allowed the law-enforcing disciples to bind his wrists and his feet with cow sinew rope.

By now, it was totally dark. Bai Shijing ordered his disciples to light some torches. The light of the torches flickered across the faces of the bound elders, revealing a series of gloomy, dejected expressions.

Bai Shijing turned to stare at Liu Zhuzhuang. "How could you act in such a manner? Are you fit to be a member of the Beggars' Clan? Shall you end it yourself, or will you force others to act for you?" Liu Zhuzhuang said, "I...I..." He wasn't able to finish his sentence, but he slowly withdrew a dagger from his waist, wanting to slit his own throat. However, his hand shook so badly that he was unable to chop at his own neck. A law-enforcing disciple called out, "You are so useless! It's unfortunate that you've wasted so much time within our clan!" Catching his upper arm, the law-enforcing disciple gave a mighty pull and helped him cut his own larynx. Liu Zhuzhuang gurgled, "I...thank you..." He immediately passed away.

Within the Beggars' Clan, there was a rule that if a person broke the laws of the clan in such a way as to merit the death penalty, so long as he took his own life, all of his sins would have been washed away and everyone would still consider him as being one of their brothers. But if it was one of the law-enforcing disciples who killed him, his honor would be forever besmirched. Earlier, that law-enforcing disciple saw that Liu Zhuzhuang wanted to take his own life, but simply didn't have the strength to do so. That was the only reason why he had assisted him.

Wang Yuyan, Duan Yu, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi accidentally oversaw an internal rebellion within the ranks of the Beggars' Clan. They all felt as though they were outsiders peeping in on the Beggars' Clan's secret affairs, which was highly improper. But if they were to leave now, they would run the risk of raising the beggars' suspicions. All they could do was sit far away and pretend to be indifferent and unconcerned. After seeing how Li Chunlai and Liu Zhuzhuang's blood splattered across the ground, how their

corpses now lay cold on the floor, and how the four awe-inspiring Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu had been bound, it seemed to them as though there must be even more soul-stirring events to come. All of them looked at each other, feeling extremely awkward. Duan Yu was Qiao Feng's sworn brother, and earlier, when Feng Bo'e had been poisoned, drained away the poison on Qiao Feng's behalf. Wang Yuyan and the other two girls felt extremely grateful towards Qiao Feng. Now, seeing how he had pacified the rebellion and dealt with the traitors one by one, they all felt happy for him.

Qiao Feng uncomfortably sat to one side. Although the traitors had been subdued, he didn't feel the least bit triumphant or happy. He remembered how, thanks to the benevolence of his master, Chief Wang, he had been given the position of chief of the Beggars' Clan. Over the past eight years as chief, Qiao Feng had endured many trials and tribulations, from pacifying internal wrangles to resisting outside foes. He had always used every ounce of his strength to deal with the matters in such a manner as to make the Beggars' Clan greatly flourish, without harboring the slightest selfish thought. Now, the Beggars' Clan had a magnificent, glorious reputation in the martial world, something which truly was in large part a product of his efforts. Why would so many people, in such a short period of time, suddenly scheme to revolt against him? If it was simply a matter of Quan Guanqing being ambitious and desiring to rule the clan, why would senior statesmen such as Elders Song and Xi or an honest and upright person such as Elder Wu all participate? Could it be that he accidentally did something to greatly offend all of the brothers of the clan which even he himself did not know about?

Bai Shijing said in a clear voice, "Brothers, Chief Qiao did not succeed Chief Wang by force of arms or trickery or use any inappropriate methods to gain his position. In the past, Chief Wang tested him by giving him three tough problems

to deal with and ordering him to accomplish seven great deeds on behalf of the clan before passing the 'Dog Beating Stick' to him. That year, when we were holding our great conference at Mt. Tai, our clan was besieged by enemies and in a very critical situation. It was all thanks to Chief Qiao wounding nine powerful enemies in a row that we were able to pull through. Many of the brothers present personally witnessed this. Over the past few years, our clan has flourished and prospered. Everyone here knows that this is all thanks to Chief Qiao's efforts. Chief Qiao treats people justly and benevolently, and handles matters even-handedly and impartially. We should expend every effort to support him as leader. How can it be that there are people who've gone stupid and decided to engage in armed rebellion? Quan Guanqing, tell us now!"

Quan Guanqing had his 'Mute' acupoint sealed by Qiao Feng. Although he clearly heard all of Bai Shijing's words, he wasn't able to reply at all. Qiao Feng walked to him and gently tapped him twice on his back, unsealing his acupoint. Qiao Feng said, "Hall-master Quan, if I, Qiao Feng, have done wrong by our brothers, please go ahead and openly accuse me. Don't be afraid and don't have any misgivings." Quan Guanqing immediately leapt to his feet, but because his legs were still numb, immediately sank to his knees again. He loudly shouted, "You haven't done anything wrong by our brothers yet, but you soon will!" Only after saying these words did he rise to his feet again.

Bai Shijing roared, "Nonsense! In his conduct and bearing, Chief Qiao has always been open and upright. He's never done anything bad in the past, and never will in the future. Based on these baseless accusations, you actually agitated our brothers and convinced them to betray the chief? To tell you the truth, I myself have heard these rumors before, and simply treated them as utter bullshit. This old man punched the person who was spreading this bullshit and shattered three of his ribs. I can't believe that there are

so many idiots who actually believed your crap. No matter what you say, all you have is these few words. Go ahead and end your own life!"

Qiao Feng thought to himself, "So there have long been ugly rumors about me spread behind my back which even Elder Bai has heard. For him to not bring them to my attention must mean they are extremely vicious rumors indeed. A real man isn't afraid to confront any words or deeds. Why the need to hide them?" He said in a calm voice, "Elder Bai, no need to be impatient. Allow Hall-master Quan to clearly explain everything in detail. For even the likes of Elder Song and Elder Xi to put themselves against me means that I must have acted improperly in some manner."

Elder Xi said, "I was wrong in rebelling against you. No need for you to keep bringing it up. Later, after judgment has been passed, I'll just go ahead and chop at my short neck and give you my head!" He said the words in a cheerful manner, but everyone present felt deep grief in their heart. None of them showed the slightest hint of a smile on their faces.

Bai Shijing said, "Chief, your instructions are wise. Quan Guanqing, go ahead and speak."

Quan Guanqing, seeing how all four of the elders who had conspired with him had been subdued, knew that this battle was lost. But he couldn't at least go without a final struggle, and loudly said, "I believe that Vice-Chief Ma was murdered according to Qiao Feng's orders."

Qiao Feng's entire body trembled. Shocked, he said, "What?"

Quan Guanqing said, "You've always despised Vice-Chief Ma and wanted nothing more than to get rid of him. You worried that if you didn't get rid of him, your position as chief would never be secure."

Qiao Feng slowly shook his head. "That is not the case. Although I did not have deep ties of friendship with Vice-Chief Ma and we did not always agree, I've never even

thought of harming him. Let the Emperor Heaven and Empress Earth be my judge and scrutinize my words and deeds. If I, Qiao Feng, have ever had the intention of harming Ma Dayuan, then destroy my honor and my reputation, suffer thousands of calamities, and become the laughingstock of the martial world." These words were spoken with the utmost sincerity and were filled with a vast, boundless heroic spirit. Not a single person present doubted him in the slightest.

But Quan Guanqing said, "Then why is it that, after we have come to Gusu to seek revenge upon Murong Fu, you keep on colluding with the enemy?" Pointing to Wang Yuyan and the other maidens, he said, "These three are the family members and servants of Murong Fu, but you protect them." Pointing at Duan Yu, he said, "This person is Murong Fu's friend, but you became sworn brothers with him..."

Duan Yu repeatedly shook his hand in denial. "Tis not so, tis not so! I am not a friend of Murong Fu, and have never even seen his face. These three ladies can be said to be his relatives, but can't be said to be part of his family." He thought to himself that Wang Yuyan could only be considered Murong Fu's 'relative', and definitely not a member of his household. This had to be made clear.

Quan Guanqing said, "'Tis not so, tis not so.' Bao Butong is Murong Fu's subordinate, the master of the 'Golden Wind Manor'. 'A Gust of Wind', Feng Bo'e, is also Murong Fu's subordinate, the master of the 'Mysterious Frost Manor'. If it hadn't been for you, Qiao Feng, rescuing them, one would have died from poison, and the other would have been ground to paste. Everyone here saw this with their own eyes. What is there for you to deny?"

Qiao Feng unhurriedly said, "The Beggars' Clan, ever since it was founded centuries ago, has always been venerated and respected by the people of the martial world. This is not because of our numbers, or our martial arts ability, but because we act righteously and nobly, and

because we support justice and equity. Hall-master Quan, you are blaming me for protecting these three maidens. True, I am protecting them. This is because I cherish the centuries-old spotless reputation of our clan. I refuse to allow the people of the world say, 'The elders of the Beggars' Clan joined forces to bully three young girls.' Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu. Which of them isn't a senior figure in the martial world? Even if you don't cherish the reputation of the Beggars' Clan and the reputations of those four elders, the many brothers of our clan cherish them!"

After hearing these words, everyone present glanced at those three delicately sweet maidens. They all felt these words were reasonable. If others knew that they had made things difficult for three maidens, it really would greatly damage the Beggars' Clan prestige.

Bai Shijing said, "Quan Guanqing, what else do you have to say for yourself?" Turning to Qiao Feng, Bai Shijing said, "Chief, there's no need to waste time and words with a rebel who can't see the big picture. Let us go ahead and immediately sentence him in accordance with the crime of revolting against one's superiors." Qiao Feng thought to himself, "Elder Bai wants to execute Quan Guanqing as quickly as possible. It seems as though he wishes to avoid allowing him to spew out harmful rumors regarding me." In a clear voice, he said, "For Hall-master Quan to convince so many people to conspire to overthrow me, he clearly must have had a compelling case. A real man clearly differentiates between right and wrong. Brothers, if I, Qiao Feng, have done something wrong, please feel free to tell me openly!"

Elder Wu let out a sigh. "Chief, either you are an evil, unscrupulous person of great ambition who is putting up a front, or you are an honest, bold, straightforward man. I, Wu Changfeng, don't have the ability to tell. Just go ahead and kill me now." Qiao Feng felt extremely uncertain. He asked,

“Elder Wu, why did you say that I am a liar who bullies others? You...you...why do you doubt me?” Wu Changfeng shook his head. “If this matter is openly discussed, it will cause too much trouble. If the story gets out, the Beggars’ Clan will never be able to raise its head in the martial world again, and everyone will look down at us with scorn. Originally, we wanted to simply kill you with one chop and end the affair thus.”

Qiao Feng was now totally bewildered and couldn’t make head or tail out of it at all. He mumbled to himself, “Why? Why?” Raising his head, he said, “I rescued two of Murong Fu’s high-ranking subordinates, so all of you suspect me, right? But your conspiracy to rebel came before, and my rescuing of them came after. These two things have nothing to do with each other. Besides, it’s hard to say with certainty whether I am right or not, but I simply do not feel that Vice-Chief Ma was killed by Murong Fu.

Quan Guanqing asked, “Why do you say that?” He had asked this question earlier, but the tumultuous events had prevented Qiao Feng from answering. Now, he asked again.

Qiao Feng replied, “I believe that Murong Fu is a great hero and a good man. He wouldn’t kill Second Brother Ma.” Wang Yuyan, hearing Qiao Feng praise Murong Fu as ‘a great hero and a good man’, was overjoyed. She thought to herself, “It seems Chief Qiao really is a great hero and a good man as well.”

But Duan Yu, on the other hand, frowned, thinking to himself, “Not necessarily, not necessarily! Murong Fu isn’t necessarily a great hero or a good man.”

Quan Guanqing said, “Over the past two months, there have been many experts who were killed using the skill which they themselves were best at. Everyone knows that these murders were committed by Gusu’s Murong family. How can such a person who has murdered so many of our friends in the martial world be considered a great hero and a good man?” Qiao Feng slowly began to pace about as he

said, "Brothers, last night, I was drinking wine at the 'Tavern Overseeing the River' in the city of Jiangyin, next to the Yangtze river. I met a middle-aged scholar who drank over ten large bowls of hard liquor without batting an eye. What an excellent drinking capacity, and what a fine man!"

When Duan Yu heard this, he couldn't help but grin. He thought to himself, "So Elder Brother got into a drinking competition with someone last night as well. This fellow had a good tolerance for alcohol and drank freely, so Elder Brother liked him. But that doesn't necessarily mean this fellow was a good man."

Qiao Feng continued, "I drank three bowls of wine with him, then we began discussing the martial artists of Jiangnan. He bragged that he possessed the second highest level of skill in palm techniques in Jiangnan, with Young Master Murong being the best. Thus, I exchanged three palms with him. He was able to receive the first and second palms, but when he took my third palm, the wine bowl he was holding in his left hand was obliterated. The porcelain shards from the bowl slashed across his face, making him bleed, but he remained composed and said, 'What a waste, what a waste! What a waste of a perfectly fine bowl of liquor.' This greatly endeared him to me, and thus I did not send out a fourth palm. I said, 'Sir, your palm techniques are exquisite. You truly deserve the title of being the second best in Jiangnan!' He replied, 'The second in Jiangnan, but only a fart in the rest of the world!' I said, 'Brother, no need to be too modest. With regards to palm techniques, you can be considered a first-class master.' He said, 'You are Chief Qiao of the Beggars' Clan! I freely admit my loss and submit to you. Thank you for showing mercy and not injuring me. Let me offer you another toast!' The two of us drank three more bowls together. When we departed, I asked him for his name. He said that his last name was 'Gongye', and his given name was 'Qian'. This is not the 'Qian' of 'universe' [Qian Kun], but the 'Qian' in toasting others. He said that he

was a subordinate of Young Master Murong, in charge of the Scarlet Clouds Manor. He invited me to go to his manor and drink with him for three days straight. Brothers, what do you think of him? Would you consider him a good friend?"

Wu Changfeng loudly said, "This Gongye Qian fellow is a good man and a good friend! Chief, please introduce us sometime!" He forgot that he had committed a great offense and was now a prisoner, soon to be executed. When he heard about such a hero and such a good man, he immediately had the desire to make friends with him. Qiao Feng smiled, but in his heart, he was sighing. "Wu Changfeng is heroic and straightforward. Unexpectedly, he got mixed up in this rebellion as well." Elder Song said, "Chief, what happened next"

Qiao Feng replied, "After I bid Gongye Qian farewell, I hastened to Wuxi. Roughly two hours before midnight, I heard the sound of two people loudly arguing in the middle of a small bridge. By now, it was totally dark. I thought it was very strange that people would be getting into a heated argument at this time, and went to go check it out. The bridge was a single-planked bridge. On one side was a man dressed in black. On the other was a countryside villager who was carrying a bucket of feces on a carrying-pole over his shoulder. The two of them were arguing over who should cross first. The man in black yelled at the villager to go back and allow him to cross, as he reached the bridge first. The villager said that he was carrying a bucket of feces and couldn't retreat. He wanted the man in black to let him go past him. The man in black said, 'We've already been arguing here for two hours. Even if we argue all the way to midnight, I still won't give way!' The villager said, 'Aren't you afraid of how bad this bucket smells?' The man in black said, 'You're carrying a heavy bucket of crap on your shoulder! As long as you aren't afraid of being tired out, then let's just remain here until the end!'"

“When I saw this situation, I thought it was extremely funny. I thought to myself, ‘That fellow in black has a really weird temper. All he had to do was take a few steps back and let him pass. What’s the point of him getting into an in-your-face confrontation with a villager carrying a bucket of crap? Judging from their words, they’ve been at it for over two hours.’ Now that my curiosity had been aroused, I wanted to see how this would end. Would the man in black no longer be able to resist the stench and surrender, or would the villager become so tired that he would admit defeat? I didn’t want to smell the crap, though, so I watched from far away upwind. Both of them were arguing using the local Jiangnan dialect, and I couldn’t be too sure what they were saying. All I knew was that both of them were claiming that they were in the right. That villager really was strong and had a nasty stubborn streak. He moved the bucket of crap from his left shoulder to his right shoulder, then later moved it from his right shoulder to his left shoulder. No matter what, he wouldn’t retreat.”

Duan Yu looked at Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi. He saw that all three of them were smiling, happily engrossed in Qiao Feng’s story. He thought to himself, “There has been an attempted revolution in the clan which is yet to be resolved. The situation is extremely critical, and yet Elder Brother is calmly and leisurely telling stories. It’s natural for Wang Yuyan and the girls to be interested in stories like this, but how could a heroic, bold man like Elder Brother show such a childish innocence as well?

Surprisingly, the hundred-plus members of the Beggars’ Clan present were all solemnly and respectfully listening to Qiao Feng’s story. Not a single person thought Qiao Feng’s words were boring.

Qiao Feng continued, “After watching for a while, I slowly grew astonished. I noticed that the man in black had an extremely stable footing, not budging in the slightest, as immovable as a mountain. He was actually someone who

possessed a high level of martial arts. The villager carrying the bucket of crap was just an ordinary person. Although he was very sturdy and robust, he didn't know any martial arts at all. The more I watched, the more baffled I was. I thought to myself, 'With the fellow in black's strong level of martial arts, all he has to do is extend his little finger in a single poke and knock both the villager and his bucket into the river. But instead, he doesn't use any martial arts at all. For a master such as him, it might be natural for him to exercise self-restraint, but even if he refused to let the other person by, he could easily jump over the villager's head. But instead, he insists on standing there and arguing with the villager. How amusing!'

"The man in black suddenly raised his voice and shouted, 'If you don't let me by, I'm going to start cussing you out!' The villager said, 'If you want to cuss, then cuss. So you know how to cuss at people. You think I don't?' The villager actually seized the initiative and immediately began to cuss. The man in black began to cuss right back at him. Trading cusses back and forth, the two pulled out all sorts of strange, bizarre, and filthy curses to insult the other with. I couldn't even understand half of these strange local Jiangnan swear words. After cussing for over an hour, the villager became exhausted. The man in black, thanks to his strong internal energy, was perfectly fine and still energetic. I saw the villager's body began to sway. It seemed that very shortly, he would be so exhausted that he'd fall into the river."

"Suddenly, the villager stuck his hand into the bucket of feces, grabbed some of it, then tossed it towards the man in black's face. The man in black never imagined that he would be attacked like this. As he let out a cry of alarm, the crap splattered him in the face. I secretly said to myself, 'Oh no! This villager has just doomed himself, and he can't blame anyone else for what will happen.' I saw that the man in black was furious. Lifting his palm, he struck downwards towards the villager's head.'

Although Duan Yu was listening to Qiao Feng, his eyes were fixed on Wang Yuyan's slightly parted, cherry-like lips. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Ah Zhu and Ah Bi smile at each other, but paid them no mind.

Qiao Feng continued, "All of this happened too quickly. To avoid the stench, I was over a hundred meters away. I wanted to go rescue that villager, but I wouldn't be able to. Oddly, just before the man in black's palm was about to strike down on the villager's skull, he suddenly froze and didn't follow through, bringing his palm to a halt mid-air. He loudly laughed, 'Old chap, in our contest of patience, who won and who lost?' That villager was really stubborn. He had clearly lost, but he refused to admit it. He said, 'I'm carrying a big bucket of crap. You gained an advantage from this. If you don't believe me, how about you take this bucket and I'll stand here with my hands free. Then, we'll see who wins and who loses!' The man in black said, 'That's fair enough!' He reached out and pulled the bucket of crap towards himself, straightening his arm and lifting the bucket up with the palm of his left hand."

"Seeing as how the man in black was carrying the bucket while holding his arm straight, the villager was stupefied. He said, 'You...you...' The man in black laughed, 'I'll help you support the bucket of crap like this without moving. Let's compete again, and this time, whoever loses has to drink this entire bucket of crap!' Seeing how incredibly strong the man in black was, the villager no longer dared to argue with him. He hurriedly retreated, but he was so flustered that he lost his footing and fell down towards the river. The man in black stretched out his right hand, grabbing him by his collar and lifting him up. Still supporting the bucket with his left hand while lifting the villager in the air with his right, the man in black laughed loudly. "Fun, fun!" In the twinkling of an eye, he lightly leapt over to the other side of the bridge, placing both the villager and his bucket on the floor.

Then he utilized his qinggong and disappeared into the mulberry forest.”

“The man in black had his face splattered with crap by the villager. He wouldn’t have had to use any effort to kill him. Even if he wasn’t willing to kill someone just like that, it would have been very natural for him to give the villager a beating. But he didn’t do that at all. He had a very unique temperament, the like of which is rarely seen in the martial world. Brothers, I witnessed this with my own eyes. I was very far away from him, and I do not believe he knew I was there and was just putting on a show for me. Would you consider a person like this a good friend and a fine man?”

Elder Wu, Elder Chen, and Elder Bai all said in unison, “Right! He’s a fine man!” Elder Chen said, “It’s unfortunate that you didn’t manage to get his name, Chief. If you had, you could introduce him to us, so as to let us know that within the personages of Jiangnan, there’s actually a hero such as him.”

Qiao Feng slowly said, “This friend actually just exchanged a few stances with Elder Chen, and his arm was wounded by your poison scorpion.” Elder Chen was shocked. “He is ‘A Gust of Wind’, Feng Bo’e!” Qiao Feng nodded. “Correct!”

Only now did Duan Yu understand that Qiao Feng had carefully and meticulously described this anecdote in order to recount to everyone Feng Bo’e’s character and temperament. Duan Yu now realized that although Feng Bo’e was very ugly and loved to cause trouble and fight, he was by nature a very good person. This truly was an example of how one should not judge a person by their appearance. Earlier, when the girls were raptly listening to the story and Ah Zhu and Ah Bi exchanged smiles, it was because they well knew Feng Bo’e’s temperament. They knew that this gentleman must be Feng Bo’e, and also knew that this gentleman definitely wouldn’t wantonly kill others.

Qiao Feng continued, "Elder Chen, the Beggars' Clan considers itself to be the foremost large clan of the world. You yourself are a very important figure within our clan. Your rank and prestige cannot be compared in the same breath with the local Jiangnan martial artist named Feng Bo'e. Feng Bo'e, when feeling insulted and humiliated, could control himself and not harm an innocent. How can the experts of the Beggars' Clan prove ourselves to be lesser than him?" Elder Chen's entire face blushed, with even his ears reddening. "Chief, thank you for the lesson. You ordered me to give him the antidote because of your concern for my reputation and prestige. I, Chen Guyan, didn't understand your noble intentions and harbored a grudge against you. I'm as stupid as a wooden ox or a braying donkey." Qiao Feng replied, "Preserving your reputation and the reputation of our clan was only a secondary concern to me. The most important rule for us martial artists is to not harm innocents. Elder Chen, even if you weren't a very important figure within our clan and weren't such an illustrious figure within the martial arts world, you still cannot take the lives of others so easily, without a clear certainty regarding the facts!" Elder Chen bowed his head. "I, Chen Guyan, admit to my wrongdoing."

Seeing that he had managed to convince Chen Guyan, the most haughty of the four elders, with his words, Qiao Feng felt extremely happy. He slowly said, "Gongye Qian was a heroic man, and Feng Bo'e was a man who knew right from wrong. Bao Butong acts unrestrained and naturally, and these three maidens are gentle, refined, and proper. All of these people are Young Master Murong's subordinates, his friends, or his relatives. As the saying goes, 'things of one kind come together, birds of a feather flock together'. Brothers, calm yourselves and think: If Young Master Murong has friends and associates such as they, can he himself be a wicked, vile, despicable, shameless villain?"

The people of the Beggars' Clan highly valued the code of brotherhood and loved friends. They all thought that these words were reasonable, and many people chimed in agreement.

But Quan Guanqing said, "Chief, are you saying that in your opinion, it definitely was not Murong Fu who killed Vice-Chief Ma?"

Qiao Feng replied, "I dare not say that Murong Fu is definitely the person who assassinated Vice-Chief Ma, but I also dare not say that he definitely was not the person either. There's no need to rush to complete our vengeance. We need to clearly investigate the situation. If we can prove that it was Murong Fu who did the deed, naturally we will seize him and avenge Vice-Chief Ma's death. But if we cannot prove it was him, we must continue to seek the real perpetrator. If we kill a good man solely based on wild conjecture while allowing the real killer to remain free and secretly laugh at how stupid and incompetent the Beggars' Clan is, not only will we have wronged the person we falsely accused and killed and wronged Vice-Chief Ma, we'll also have ruined the Beggars' Clan's illustrious name. Brothers, do you think you will enjoy the taste of being ridiculed and insulted as you travel about the martial world?"

Hearing his words, every person present was moved. This entire time, the skill-instructing elder had remained silent. Now, he stroked his thin, fine beard and said, "Your words are reasonable. In the past, I once killed an innocent man by mistake. To this very day, it troubles me. To this very day, it troubles me!"

Wu Changfeng loudly said, "Chief, we rebelled against you because we made the mistake of listening to the words of others. We knew that you didn't get along with Vice-Chief Ma, and secretly suspected you of conspiring with Gusu's Murong family to kill him. All sorts of things added up and we couldn't help but be suspicious. In hindsight, we were all

so stupid! Elder Bai, please bring out the knives of law! We'll take our own lives in accordance with clan regulations!"

Bai Shijing's face was as cold as winter. In a heavy voice, he said, "Law-enforcing disciples, please bring out the knives of law."

Nine of his disciples immediately said, "Yes sir!" Each of them withdrew a yellow cloth bundle from a sack on their backs. They opened the bundles, each retrieving a short knife from within. The nine gleaming, brilliant knives were placed side by side. They were equal in size and shape. Underneath the blazing light of the torches, a blue light could be seen gleaming from the edges of the knives. A law-enforcing disciple brought over a tree trunk, and all nine of the other law-enforcing disciples stuck the knives into the trunk. The knives slipped into the trunk with ease; clearly, these blades were extraordinary. The nine of them called out in unison, "The knives of law have been assembled!"

Bai Shijing let out a sigh. "Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu made the mistake of listening to the lies of others and conspired to rebel. They would have caused great damage to the clan. Their punishment is death by one knife. Quan Guanqing, the hall-master of the 'Hall of Great Wisdom', spread vicious rumors and created internal dissent. His punishment is death by nine knives. All other disciples who participated in this revolt bear responsibility for their offences as well. In the future, there will be an investigation and they shall each receive punishment."

As he declared every person's crime and punishment, no one spoke. In every single organization in the world, the penalty for plotting to overthrow the leader or betraying the organization was death. There was nothing strange about this at all. When the people present had participated in the plot, they knew of this possible outcome.

Wu Changfeng took large steps forward. Bowing to Qiao Feng, he said, "Chief, Wu Changfeng has wronged you! I hope you understand that I was foolish. After I die, please

forgive me, Wu Changfeng!" As he spoke, he walked to the knives of law and loudly said, "Wu Changfeng will take his own life. Law-enforcing disciples, release me from my bonds!" A law-enforcing disciple said, "Yes sir!" But as he went forward to cut Wu Changfeng loose, Qiao Feng shouted, "Wait!"

Wu Changfeng's face immediately turned a deathly, ashen pale. With bated breath, he said, "Chief, is it that my sin is too great, and you will not allow me to take my own life?"

According to the rules of the Beggars' Clan, if a person who had broken the laws of the clan took his own life, his reputation would be restored and spotless, and the crimes he had committed would not be revealed to anyone else. If anyone in the world insulted that person's memory, the Beggars' Clan would actually intervene on their departed comrade's behalf. All of the heroes of the martial world greatly valued their reputation and were unwilling to allow it to be besmirched after their deaths. Wu Changfeng, seeing that Qiao Feng was not willing to allow him to take his own life, felt both shame and dread.

Qiao Feng did not immediately reply. He walked to the knives of law, then said, "Fifteen years ago, the country of Khitan invaded us via the Yanmen Pass [Wild Geese Pass]. After Elder Song received this news, he rushed back to inform us of this critical military news. He did not eat for three days, and did not sleep for four nights. Enroute, he rode nine horses to their deaths. He himself was so exhausted that he sustained severe internal injuries and vomited blood. But with his news, our country, the Great Song, was prepared for the attack and the Khitans were beaten back and forced to retreat. This was a major, meritorious deed which affected the entire country. Although the heroes of the martial world are not aware of the details of this event, we in the Beggars' Clan are. Law-enforcing Elder, I hope you will take into consideration the major

contributions which Elder Song have made and will allow him to atone for his crimes in some other fashion.

Bai Shijing replied, "Chief, it is reasonable for you to beg clemency on behalf of Elder Song. But it is said thusly in our laws: 'The great crime of betraying the clan cannot be pardoned. No matter how meritorious the offender's past deeds, it cannot atone for this crime. This is so that those who have done great deeds will not become arrogant and overbearing and risk destroying our clan.' Chief, your plea is not in keeping with the laws of our clan. We cannot breach the rules which the many successive chiefs of the past have laid down!"

Elder Song laughed sadly. He took two steps forward, then said, "The law-enforcing elder's words are totally true. For us to become elders of the clan, we all naturally had to perform many great deeds of valor. If everyone excuses themselves by pointing to their past valors, then all sorts of crimes will be committed. Chief, please be merciful and allow me to take my own life." With two cracking sounds, he shattered the cow sinew-strings which bound his wrists.

Looks of shock appeared on everyone's face. The sinew-strings were both hard and tough. Even if a person were to chop at them using a steel sabre, it still might take a while to chop them apart. Elder Song was actually able to shatter them simply by lifting his hands up. He really lived up to his reputation as being one of the elders of the Beggars' Clan. His hands now free, Elder Song stretched them out to snatch a law knife in front of him so as to take his own life. Unexpectedly, a soft stream of energy gushed towards him. His hand was only a foot away from the knives, but he could no longer move his hand forward any farther. Qiao Feng was refusing to allow him to withdraw the knife.

A grieved look on his face, Elder Song called out, "Chief, you..." Qiao Feng stretched his hand out, pulled out the first knife on the left side. Elder Song said, "Forget it, forget it! I had the intention to kill you. It is just that I be punished! Go

ahead and kill me!" The knife blade flashed across his eyes. With a puffing sound, Qiao Feng stabbed himself in his own shoulder with the knife.

All the beggars let out a loud cry. In unison, they all rose to their feet. Shocked, Duan Yu said, "Elder Brother, you!" Even outsiders such as Wang Yuyan were so terrified by this unexpected development that their lovely features changed. The maidens cried out, "Chief Qiao, don't..."

Qiao Feng said, "Elder Bai, within the regulations of our clan, there is this line: 'When the disciples of our clan commit a crime and cannot be forgiven, if the chief wishes to pardon them, he must shed his own blood on their behalf to wash away their crimes.' Am I right?"

Bai Shijing's face was as rigid and hard as stone. Slowly, he said, "Within our regulations, there is such a line. But for the chief to shed his own blood to wash away their sins, he must consider whether or not it is worth it."

Qiao Feng replied, "As long as I am not breaching the laws of our ancestors, I am happy." Turning around, he said to Elder Xi, "In the past, Elder Xi instructed me in martial arts. Although he was not formally my master, he acted in that capacity. However, that is just an act of personal kindness to me. In the past, Chief Wang was surrounded by five elite Khitan fighters and trapped within the 'Cave of Sinister Wind' of Mt. Qilian. The Khitans intended to force our clan to surrender to them. Chief Wang was short and stout, and also looked something similar to Elder Xi. Elder Xi disguised himself as Chief Wang and went to die in his place. Only then did Chief Wang manage to escape. This is a great deed which benefited both our clan and our country. I absolutely must pardon him for his crimes!" As he spoke, he pulled out a second knife of law. With a light swish, he cut apart the cow sinew-strings binding Elder Xi's wrists, then stabbed himself in the shoulder with this knife as well.

He slowly turned to walk towards Elder Chen. Elder Chen had a very strange temperament. In the past, he had

wronged his family clan, changed his name, and fled. He was always afraid that others would rip open this scar of his. He dreaded Qiao Feng's intelligence, and thus always was distant towards Qiao Feng, not willing to become close friends. Now, seeing Qiao Feng turn his eyes towards him, he loudly said, "Chief Qiao, I don't have much of a friendship with you. I offended you far too often in the past, and don't dare ask for you to shed blood on my behalf." Flipping his arms around, he suddenly brought his bound hands to the front. His skill in the 'Arm Passing Through' technique had reached the acme of perfection, and he was able to retract and advance his arms easily. As he squatted down, he snatched out and grabbed one of the knives.

Qiao Feng launched a backhanded attack and easily removed the weapon from his grasp. In a clear voice, he said, "Elder Chen! I, Qiao Feng, am a crude, boorish fellow. I don't like to make friends with people who are cautious, conservative, and prudent. I also don't like people who don't drink, don't laugh, or who are taciturn. This is just my natural disposition. I can't change it. We have totally different personalities, making it difficult for us to avoid quarrelling. I didn't like Vice-Chief Ma's personality much either, and whenever I saw him, I would avoid him. I'd rather go and drink strong liquor or eat roast meat with low ranking, one-bagged or two-bagged brothers. Everyone knows this temperament of mine. But if you think that I wished to get rid of you or Vice-Chief Ma, then you are wrong, totally wrong! You and Vice-Chief Ma are experienced, prudent people who never drink. Those are good traits. I, Qiao Feng, cannot measure up to you!" And as he said this, he stabbed himself in the shoulder with this third knife, before continuing, "Outsiders don't know who committed the great deed of killing Yelu Bulu, the deputy marshal of the left wing of the Khitan army, but can it be that I also don't know?"

All the beggars immediately began to murmur and whisper in mingled shock and admiration. Many years ago, the Khitan nation carried out a major invasion of the Great Song, but many of their generals and leaders kept on being assassinated. Their leadership decapitated, they retreated without winning any victories and the Great Song managed to avoid a catastrophe. Amongst the generals who were killed was Yelu Bulu, the deputy marshal of the left wing of the army. Aside from the highest ranking members of the Beggars' Clan, nobody was aware that Elder Chen was the one who did this great deed.

Elder Chen, hearing Qiao Feng publicly advertise his great accomplishment, felt consoled. In a low voice, he said, "I, Chen Guyan, whose name is known throughout the world, am deeply moved by my chief's great benevolence and virtue."

The Beggars' Clan had always secretly assisted the Great Song in fighting off its enemies, protecting the nation and defending its citizens. But in order to prevent the enemies from noticing them and focusing their efforts on destroying the Beggars' Clan, the clan decided that regardless of whether or not their stratagems succeeded, they would not reveal what they had done to outsiders. They even kept the secrets from as many members of the Beggars' Clan itself as possible. Chen Guyan had always acted arrogantly and rudely. He was older than Qiao Feng, had served in the clan longer, and thus usually was not especially meek or modest in front of him. All the beggars within the clan knew this. Now, seeing how the chief forgave him of his crimes and shed blood in order to wash away his sins, all of the beggars present were moved.

Walking towards Wu Changfeng, Qiao Feng said, "Elder Wu, you once guarded the Yinchou Gorge by yourself, using nothing but your own strength to resist the experts of the Western Xia's 'League of Elites' and prevented them from achieving their goal of assassinating the general of the Yang

family, Yang Ye [The legend of Yang Ye and of the Yang family generals is a famous Chinese legend]. The 'Golden Medal of Valor' which Marshall Yang awarded him is in and of itself sufficient to pardon him of his crimes today. Take it out and display it to everyone!" Suddenly, Wu Changfeng's face flushed, as he looked both embarrassed and uneasy. "That, uh...uh..." Qiao Feng said, "All of us present are your brothers. Elder Wu, if there's anything problematic about my request, just go ahead and say it without worry." Wu Changfeng replied, "About that golden medal of mine... well...to tell you the truth, Chief, it...um...it...it disappeared." Astonished, Qiao Feng said, "How did it disappear?"

Wu Changfeng said, "I lost it. Um..." After composing himself, he said in a loud voice, "One day, I really was craving some alcohol, but didn't have any money on me. I sold the gold medal to a jewelry store." Qiao Feng laughed uproariously. "Forthright and carefree! Only, I'm afraid that by doing so, you've wronged Marshall Yang a bit!" As he spoke, he pulled out a fourth knife. First, he used it to cut Wu Changfeng's bonds. Then, he planted it in his left shoulder.

Wu Changfeng loudly shouted, "Chief, you have shown me great benevolence and mercy. From this day forth, Wu Changfeng's life belongs to you. I'll never listen to anyone who spreads rumors about you ever again!" Qiao Feng clapped him on the shoulder, then laughed, "We're beggars. If we don't have food to eat or wine to drink, we should go beg for some. There's no need for us to sell gold medals." Wu Changfeng laughed, "It's easy to beg for food, but hard to beg for alcohol. Everyone always says, 'Foul beggar, now that your stomach is full, you want alcohol to drink as well? How shameless! I won't give you any, I won't give you any!'"

All the beggars listening boomed with laughter. Plenty of beggars within the clan had begged for alcohol, only to be refused. In addition, now that Qiao Feng had pardoned the

four elders of their crimes, everyone felt as though a great burden had been lifted from them. Now, everyone's eyes turned to Quan Guanqing. They thought to themselves that he was the chief instigator and agitator of this plot to cause a revolt within the clan. No matter how magnanimous Qiao Feng was, there was no way he could pardon him.

Qiao Feng walked to Quan Guanqing. He said, "Hall-master Quan, do you have anything to say?" Quan Guanqing replied, "I rebelled against you for the sake of the safety of our nation, the Great Song, and for the sake of preserving the Beggars' Clan. Unfortunately, the people to whom I revealed your true history are all cowards who are afraid of death and aren't willing to reveal themselves. Just go ahead and kill me!" Qiao Feng pondered for a bit, then said, "If there's anything wrong with my history, go ahead and say it openly." Quan Guanqing shook his head. "If I make empty accusations now, no one will believe me. It's best if you just kill me now."

Qiao Feng was filled with suspicion. He loudly said, "A real man says whatever is on his mind. Why hem and haw and refuse to speak when you want to? Quan Guanqing, a real man isn't afraid of death, much less saying a few words."

Quan Guanqing laughed bitterly. "Right. If one doesn't even fear death, what does he have to fear? Qiao Feng, hurry up and kill me with a single chop. That way, I won't have to stay alive and watch the Beggars' Clan submit to the barbarians, or the beautiful mountains of the Great Song be annexed by foreigners." Qiao Feng said, "Why would the Beggars' Clan fall under the control of barbarians? Explain clearly!" Quan Guanqing replied, "No one will believe anything I say now. They'll assume that I'm a coward who fears death and who made everything up. No matter what, I will die. Why should I leave behind a bad name?"

Bai Shijing loudly said, "Chief, this person is crafty and deceptive. He's saying a bunch of garbage, hoping to

convince you to spare his life as well. Law-enforcing disciples, take the knives of law and carry out the sentence!”

A law-enforcing disciple said, “Yes sir!” He stepped forward, pulling out a knife and walking towards Quan Guanqing.

Qiao Feng never let his gaze waver from Quan Guanqing. Qiao Feng only saw an aggrieved, angry look on his face, and did not see any crafty or deceptive signs. Nor did Qiao Feng see any fear or dread. He began to feel suspicious, and said to the law-enforcing disciple, “Give me the knife of law.” The law-enforcing disciple respectfully presented it to him with both hands.

Receiving the knife, Qiao Feng said, “Hall-master Quan, you say that you know my real history, and that it affects the safety of the Beggars’ Clan. And yet, you are afraid to reveal what you claim the truth is.” As he spoke, he wrapped up the knife into a bundle, placing the bundle within his clothes. “You have formented armed rebellion. It will be hard to pardon your crimes. However, I will temporarily grant a stay of execution. After the truth of the matter comes out, I will personally kill you. I, Qiao Feng, am not a fussy person who dithers and dickers. Now that I am determined to kill you, I’ll wager you won’t be able to escape me. Go away now, and leave behind your bags. From now on, you are no longer a member of the Beggars’ Clan.”

The phrase, ‘leave behind your bags’, carried with it the implicit meaning of expelling him from the Beggars’ Clan. Aside from brand new members of the Beggars’ Clan who had no formal duties at all, every person in the clan carried anywhere from one to nine cloth bags over their backs. The number of bags they carried signified the rank they held within the clan. When Quan Guanqing heard Qiao Feng order him to leave his bags behind, a murderous look filled his eyes. Turning around, he snatched one of the knives of law, inverted it, then pointed it towards his chest. Being

expelled from one's clan or sect is so humiliating that the depth of the shame is difficult to describe. It was often considered to be even more intolerable than being executed on the spot.

Qiao Feng coldly watched him, waiting to see if he would actually kill himself or not.

Quan Guanqing held the law knife with a steady arm, hand not shaking in the slightest. Turning his head, he stared at Qiao Feng. The two locked gazes. Instantly, everyone went silent and no noise could be heard at all within the apricot forest. Quan Guanqing suddenly said, "Qiao Feng, you are so calm and self-possessed! Can it be that you really don't know?" Qiao Feng said, "Know what?"

Quan Guanqing opened his mouth, but in the end, he said nothing. He slowly returned the knife of law to its original location, then just as slowly removed the bags from his back, reverently placing them on the floor.

Just as Quan Guanqing removed his fifth bag, the sound of galloping hoofsteps could be heard as a horse charged towards them from the north, followed by two whistles. The beggars on sentry whistled in report as the horses grew nearer and nearer. Wu Changfeng mumbled to himself, "What sort of critical event has happened?" Before the horse from the north had arrived, the sound of another horse could be heard from the east. Only, it was farther away and its hoofsteps were indistinct. No one could tell in which direction it was headed.

In a short period of time, the horse from the north arrived at the outskirts of the apricot forest. A man leapt off the back of the horse and ran into the forest. He wore an extremely magnificent wide-sleeved gown, which he hurriedly shucked off and threw away, revealing a tattered uniform of the Beggars' Clan. Duan Yu only had to think about it for a moment, before immediately understanding: For a member of the Beggars' Clan to rush about on a horse would be very conspicuous, and government officials would

often halt them to investigate. However, a messenger delivering an urgent message absolutely must use a horse. Thus, the beggar dressed up as a rich, prosperous merchant. However, he continued to wear his own original clothes underneath, so as to show that he had not forgotten where his loyalties lie.

That person walked to hall-master of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness', respectfully presenting him with a package. "Urgent report on the military situation..." After saying these words, he ran out of breath and began panting. Suddenly, the horse he had ridden to here let out a mournful neigh, then collapsed on the floor. It had been exhausted to death. The courier's body swayed, then he suddenly fell down as well. It was obvious that both the courier and his horse had been rushing for a long distance, and both had used up all of their strength.

The hall-master of the 'Hall of Great Righteousness' recognized this courier. He was one of the beggars whom had been sent to spy upon the Western Xia's 'League of Elites'. Seeing how this person had exhausted himself to deliver this message, its contents surely must be of great importance and unusual urgency. Thus, he did not open the pouch itself, and instead offered it to Qiao Feng, saying, "Critical military report regarding the Western Xia. The courier was sent to keep an eye on the Western Xia along with Brother Yi Dabiao."

Qiao Feng took the pouch. Opening it, he saw that there was a wax pellet. He broke open the pellet, retrieving from within a roll of paper. Just as he was about to read what was written on the paper, the sound of hoofsteps grew louder as the horse from the east burst into the apricot forest. Just as it entered the forest, the man on the horse flew out of its saddle, shouting, "Qiao Feng, the message within the wax pellet involves critical military intelligence. You cannot read it!"

Everyone present was startled. They saw that this person was an extremely old beggar with a white beard which fluttered in the wind, and who wore a turtledove robe which had been repaired over and over again. The skill-instructing elder and the law-enforcing elder rose to their feet simultaneously. "Elder Xu, what business causes you to grace us with your presence?"

When the beggars heard that it was Elder Xu who had arrived, looks of shock appeared on their face. Elder Xu, at eighty seven years of age, was of an extremely senior generation within the Beggars' Clan. Even the previous chief, Chief Wang, addressed him as 'martial-uncle'. Everyone within the clan was of a lower generation than him. He had retired many years ago, and had long since ceased to pay attention to worldly affairs. Every year, when Qiao Feng, the skill-instructing elder, and the law-enforcing elder went to pay their respects to him, they would only casually discuss some of the affairs of the clan. Surprisingly, he would suddenly rush here today, and then forbid Qiao Feng from reading the urgent news regarding the Western Xia's military movements. Everyone present was greatly shocked.

Qiao Feng immediately bowed forward in a salute. "Elder Xu, have you been well?" Following this, he opened his hand and delivered the roll of paper to Elder Xu.

Qiao Feng was the chief of the Beggars' Clan. Although it was true that he was of a younger generation than Elder Xu, he was still the person in charge when it came to events of great import involving the clan. Even the previous chief, Chief Wang, would be subject to his commands, much less a retired elder such as Elder Xu. But unexpectedly, when Elder Xu forbade Qiao Feng from reading the urgent military news regarding the Western Xia's movements, Qiao Feng did not defy him in the slightest. Everyone present was shocked.

Elder Xu said, "Excuse me!" He took the roll of paper from Qiao Feng's hands, then immediately cast his gaze at the

group of beggars. In a clear voice, he said, "The widow of Vice-Chief Ma Dayuan, Madame Ma, is soon to arrive. When she arrives, there are some things which need to be discussed. Everyone, what say ye?" All of the beggars looked at Qiao Feng, wanting to know how he would respond.

Qiao Feng was filled with doubt and suspicion. He said, "If this is a matter of great importance, then we can simply wait." Elder Xu said, "This is a matter of great importance." After saying these words, he said nothing further. He belatedly paid Qiao Feng the courtesies due to the chief, and then sat down to one side.

Duan Yu felt some misgivings about the whole situation, and also wanted to seize the opportunity to make some conversation with Wang Yuyan. He said to her in a low voice, "Miss Wang, the Beggars' Clan has so very many affairs. Should we depart, or should we stay here and watch all the fun?" Wang Yuyan wrinkled her forehead. "We are outsiders. Originally, we shouldn't get involved in their secret internal issues. However...however...the matter which they are fighting over involves my cousin. I want to listen." Duan Yu chimed in, "That's right. It's said that Vice-Chief Ma was killed by your cousin and left behind a helpless, pitiable widow." Wang Yuyan hurriedly said, "No! No! My cousin didn't kill Vice-Chief Ma. Isn't that what Chief Qiao says as well?" At this moment, the sound of hoofsteps could be heard once more as two riders galloped towards the apricot forest. In setting up their conference here, the beggars of the clan naturally left behind signs for others. In addition, they had people nearby who could lead the way for friends or give out warnings if enemies arrived.

Everyone was certain that one of the riders must be Vice-Chief Ma's widow. Strangely, one of the riders was an old man, and the other an old lady. The man had a small, short figure, while the female was extremely tall and lofty. They formed a total contrast.

Qiao Feng rose to greet them. "Granny Tan and Grandpa Tan of Mt. Taihang's Cavern of Flowing Clouds, you honor us with your presence! Qiao Feng apologizes for not welcoming you from afar, and thank you for your forgiveness." Elder Xu and the other six elders all rose up and saluted them as well.

Upon seeing this, Duan Yu realized that Granny Tan and Grandpa Tan must be wulin figures of great renown and dignitas.

Granny Tan asked, "Chief Qiao, why are there a number of knives planted on your shoulder?" Lifting up her arm, she immediately pulled out all four knives from his shoulder. The movement of her hands was extremely quick. Right after she pulled out the knives, Grandpa Tan withdrew a small box from his bosom. Opening its lid, he dabbed his finger into some ointment within the box, then spread it on the wounds on Qiao Feng's shoulder. As soon as he applied this 'Golden Wound' ointment, the fresh blood which was spewing forth from the wounds instantly came to a halt. The speed which Granny Tan displayed in retrieving the knives was very rarely seen, but it was only a single action. Grandpa Tan's movements in withdrawing the box, opening the lid, dabbing the ointment, applying it to the wounds, then staunching the bleeding were neat and tidy. Although his movements were very quick, everyone was able to see them clearly and distinctly. It truly appeared almost like magic, or sleight of hand. In addition, the 'Golden Wound' ointment's almost divine efficacy in stopping the flow of blood was even more unimaginable. As soon as it was applied, the blood stopped flowing, without even the slightest delay.

Qiao Feng saw that Granny Tan and Grandpa Tan immediately helped him treat his wounds without even carrying about the how's and why's of the situation. Although he felt this was a bit rash of them, he also felt extremely moved. Even as he was in the process of thanking them, he felt that the pain in his shoulders became replaced by itchiness. In a very short amount of time, much of the

pain was greatly reduced. He had never even heard of a cure as miraculous as this 'Golden Wound' ointment, much less have personally seen it before.

Granny Tan asked again, "Chief Qiao, who in the world has the audacity to stab you with these knives?" Qiao Feng laughed. "I did it to myself." Curious, Granny Tan asked, "Why would you stab yourself? Are you tired of living?" Qiao Feng smiled. "I stabbed myself for the fun of it. The flesh on my shoulders is thick and tough. I didn't harm the sinews or the bone." Elders Song, Xi, Chen, and Wu, hearing Qiao Feng conceal the real story, felt both moved and ashamed.

Granny Tan let out a laugh. "What type of lies are you spewing out? Oh, I know! You clever little imp, you heard that Grandpa Tan created a brand-new, incomparably efficacious ointment for wounds, using a mixture of 'Frozen Jade from the North Pole' and the 'Mysterious Ice Toad', and you wanted to give it a test run, right?"

Qiao Feng was noncommittal. He only smiled a little, then thought to himself, "This old granny is extremely simple and tactless. Who in the world could be so bored as to stab themselves with knives, so as to test out your new medicine?"

The sound of hoofbeats could be heard once more, as a donkey charged into the apricot forest. On the donkey was seated a man mounted backwards. His back was facing the front of the donkey, while his front was facing the donkey's tail. Granny Tan's face was immediately wreathed in smiles. She shouted out, "Martial-brother, what type of crazy game are you up to now? I'll spank you!"

When everyone looked at the rider, they saw that he had shrunk his body into a ball, as though he were a seven or eight year old child. Granny Tan stretched out with her palm, slapping at his buttocks. That person immediately rolled down to the ground. As he stretched his hand out to steady himself, he suddenly became both big and strong. Everyone was a bit startled. Grandpa Tan, however, had a rather

unhappy look on his face. With a hmph, he tossed a side-glance at the man while saying, "I was wondering who it was. So it's you." He immediately turned his head to stare at Granny Tan.

If one were to say that the man who was riding the donkey backwards was very old, it didn't seem he was all that old. But it would be equally impossible to describe him as young. He appeared to be somewhere from thirty to sixty years of age, and could not be described as ugly or as handsome. He stared raptly at Granny Tan, displaying a boundless concern and fascination with her. In a gentle voice he asked, "Little Juan, has your life been happy recently?"

Granny Tan was as large as a horse and built like an ox. Her hair was as white as silver, and her face was filled with wrinkles. Amazingly, her name was actually 'Little Juan' ('Juan' literally means graceful/beautiful). Such a delicate, pretty name was totally opposite to her appearance. Everyone within hearing range thought this was very funny. However, it was true that every old lady was once young. If she was called 'Little Juan' when she was young, it wouldn't be appropriate to change it to 'Old Juan' later on, right? Just as Duan Yu was thinking that exact thought, once more the sound of hoofsteps could be heard as multiple horses sped their way. This time, however, the speed of the horses didn't seem to be particularly urgent at all.

Qiao Feng was sizing up the donkey-rider, but was unable to determine just who he was. He was Granny Tan's elder martial brother, and while riding the donkey, he displayed an extremely brilliant usage of the 'bone shrinking technique'. Naturally, he must be an extraordinary character. However, Qiao Feng had never heard of him before.

The pack of riders arrived at the apricot forest. Riding in front were five youths, all with thick eyebrows and large eyes. They all looked very similar to each other. The eldest

appeared to be over thirty years of age, whereas the youngest was a bit over twenty. Clearly, the five of them were brothers born of the same mother.

Wu Changfeng loudly called out, "The Five Heroes of Mt. Taishan have arrived! Wonderful, wonderful! What propitious wind has blown all five of you brothers here at the same time?" The third brother of the Five Heroes of Mt. Taishan was named Shan Shushan, and he was extremely close to Wu Changfeng. He immediately seized the first chance to reply and said, "Fourth Uncle Wu, hello! My father came as well." The look on Wu Changfeng's face changed slightly. He said, "Truly? Your father..." He had just acted in a way which violated the rules of the Beggars' Clan, and still felt uneasy about it. Upon hearing that the 'Iron Faced Judge' Shan Zheng of Mt. Taishan had suddenly arrived, he couldn't help but suddenly feel flustered. The 'Iron Faced Judge' Shan Zheng hated wickedness as though it were his personal foe. If ever he heard that something unfair had occurred within the jianghu, he would definitely intervene. His own skills in martial arts was very formidable, and aside from his five sons, he also had many disciples under his tutelage, numbering over two hundred people. Everyone was in awe of the fame of "Mt. Taishan's Shan Family".

Following this, another rider galloped into the apricot forest. The Five Heroes of Mt. Taishan simultaneously brought the horse to a halt, as the rider, an old man who wore a long silk robe, floated down from his mount. He clasped his hands towards Qiao Feng, saying, "Chief Qiao, Shan Zheng has arrived without being invited. Please forgive me for interrupting."

Qiao Feng had long heard of Shan Zheng, but this was the first time they had met in person. He saw that Shan Zheng's face was filled with a healthy red glow. The man lived up to his reputation of having 'white hair and a rosy complexion'. However, he had a very mild expression on his face. It didn't seem as though he were as ruthless a person

as the rumors of jianghu made him out to be. Qiao Feng hastily cupped his fists in response and said, "If I knew that you, Elder Shan, were going to grace us with your presence, I would have welcomed you long ago."

The man who rode in on a donkey suddenly let out a weird shout. "Hah, great! So you should welcome the 'Iron Faced Judge' from afar, but when I, the 'Iron Arsed Judge' arrived, you didn't pay me any mind at all!"

Upon hearing the bizarre nickname of 'Iron Arsed Judge', everyone present laughed uproariously. Although Wang Yuyan, Ah Zhu, and Ah Bi all felt that laughing was improper, they couldn't help but let out beautiful smiles as well. Upon hearing these words, the Five Heroes of Mt. Taishan knew that this man was trying to mock their father. They immediately became upset. However, the family rules of the Shan family were extremely rigid. Since Shan Zheng himself had not said anything yet, none of his children dared to speak out of turn.

Shan Zheng possessed very good self-control. He couldn't immediately determine the origins of this weirdo, and so pretended to not have heard his words. In a clear voice, he called out, "Madame Ma, please come out and speak with us."

From behind the grove appeared a covered sedan. Two strong men were carrying the sedan, and they moved so quickly as to appear to be flying. Arriving within the forest, they set down the sedan, then parted upon the sedan curtain. From within the sedan, a young madame all dressed in mourning clothes slowly stepped out. The young madame bowed her heads towards Qiao Feng, paying her respects to him. She said, "The widow of the Ma family pays her respects to the chief."

Qiao Feng returned her salute. "Sister-in-law, I greet you."

Madame Ma said, "My late husband had the misfortune to pass away. Thankfully, the many uncles of the clan have helped to arrange his funeral rites. I am sincerely grateful to

you all.” Her voice was extremely clear and melodious. Evidently, she was very young. However, this entire time her eyes stared down at the ground, preventing others from seeing her face.

Qiao Feng believed that Madame Ma must have found an important clue in the matter of her husband’s death, which is why she had suddenly rushed here. But for her not to bring such important information to the chief of the clan, and to approach the Iron Faced Judge and Elder Xu instead, was an indication that something was very fishy here. Turning around, he glanced at the law-enforcing elder, Bai Shijing. Bai Shijing had just turned to glance at him as well. Their gazes met, and both of their eyes were filled with suspicion regarding the proceedings.

Qiao Feng decided to properly receive the guests first before handling internal affairs. He said to Shan Zheng, “Elder Shan, the married couple of Mt. Taihang’s Cavern of Flowing Clouds are here as well. I wonder if you know them?” Shan Zheng cupped his fists towards them. “I’ve long heard of the great fame of the Tan family. It is my great fortune to meet you.” Qiao Feng said, “Elder Tan, could you introduce this other old gentleman to me, so that I might pay him proper respects?”

Before Grandpa Tan had a chance to reply, the donkey rider replied, “My family name is ‘Shuang’, and my personal name is ‘Wai’. My nickname is the ‘Iron Arsed Judge.’”

No matter how good ‘Iron Faced Judge’ Shan Zheng’s temper was, he couldn’t prevent his rage from rising at this point. He thought to himself, “My family name is ‘Shan’ [Single], and he chooses the family name ‘Shuang’ [Double]. My personal name is ‘Zheng’ [Straight], and he picks the name ‘Wai’ [Crooked]. Isn’t this clearly directed at me?” Just as he was about to let loose his rage, Granny Tan said, “Elder Shan, don’t listen to Zhao Qiansun’s nonsense. He’s a bit crazy. There’s no point in getting worked up over him.”

Qiao Feng thought to himself, "This man is named Zhao Qiansun? That can't be his real name." He said, "Everyone, there's no seats here, and so I'll have to ask you all to make do with the ground." After seeing everyone sit down, he said, "If I had known a day ago that I would meet with so many distinguished elders and friends, I would have felt extremely honored and fortunate. Might I ask why all of you have graced us with your presences?"

Shan Zheng said, "Chief Qiao, your respected clan is the largest clan in the jianghu, and for centuries has had a world-spanning heroic reputation. Whenever anyone in the wulin says the words 'Beggars' Clan', they do so with great awe and respect. I, Shan Zheng, have always greatly admired the clan as well." Qiao Feng said, "You are too kind!"

Zhao Qiansun interjected, "Chief Qiao, your respected clan is the largest clan in the jianghu, and for centuries has had a world-spanning heroic reputation. Whenever anyone in the wulin says the words 'Beggars' Clan', they do so with great awe and respect. I, Shuang Wai, have always greatly admired the clan as well." His words were exactly identical to the words of Shan Zheng; only, he change the name from 'Shan Zheng' to 'Shuang Wai'.

Qiao Feng knew that many of the elders of the wulin had strange temperaments and dispositions. He didn't know why Zhao Qiansun was making fun of Shan Zheng every chance that he got, but he decided that the only thing which truly concerned him was not offending anybody. Thus, once more Qiao Feng said, "You are too kind!"

Shan Zheng smiled a little, then said to his eldest son, Shan Boshan, "Boshan, go ahead and speak to Chief Qiao in my stead. If anyone wants to imitate my son, they can go ahead and do it to their heart's content."

Everyone who heard these words couldn't help but let out a burst of laughter. They all thought to themselves that although the Iron Faced Judge posed as a man of high

morals, he was secretly quite caustic. If Zhao Qiansun imitated the words of Shan Boshan, then it would be said that Zhao Qiansun was pretending to be Shan Zheng's son.

Outrageously, Zhao Qiansun said, "Boshan, go ahead and speak to Chief Qiao in my stead. If anyone wants to imitate my son, they can go ahead and do it to their heart's content." He flipped the situation on its head, as though he were now acknowledging that he himself was Shan Boshan's father.

Shan Zheng's youngest son, Shan Xiaoshan, had the most explosive temper. He loudly cursed, "Mother****er, are you tired of living?"

Zhao Qiansun mumbled to himself, "Mother****er, four useless sons such as these are already four too many. There really was no need for a fifth. Heh, I wonder who his real father is."

Hearing how brazenly Zhao Qiansun was provoking him, even if Shan Zheng were a clay figurine, he would warp and bend. Turning his head, he said to Zhao Qiansun, "We are the guests of the Beggars' Clan for the moment. If we kick up a fuss, it would be disrespectful to our hosts. After the matter at hand is dealt with, I will naturally seek you out and see your incredible skills. Boshan, just speak!" Zhao Qiansun continued to imitate him and said, "We are the guests of the Beggars' Clan for the moment. If we kick up a fuss, it would be disrespectful to our hosts. After the matter at hand is dealt with, I will naturally seek you out and see your incredible skills. Boshan, your old man is telling you to speak. Just speak!"

Shan Boshan would have liked nothing better than to rush forward and give him a few nasty chops of the sabre and relieve the hatred in his heart. With a strenuous effort, he reined in his fury and said to Qiao Feng, "Chief Qiao, the two of us, father and son, originally would never have dared to get involved in the matters of your venerable clan, but as my father says, 'a gentleman loves men of character...' " As

he said this, he glanced at Zhao Qiansun, wondering if Zhao Qiansun would be imitating him. If he was, he would be forced to also say, 'But as my father says, 'a gentleman loves men of character'. Thus, Zhao Qiansun would be saying that Shan Zheng was his father.

Amazingly, Zhao Qiansun really did continue to imitate him. He said, "Chief Qiao, the two us, father and son, originally would never have dared to get involved in the matters of your venerable clan, but as my son says, 'a gentleman loves men of character'." He changed the word 'father' to 'son'. Naturally, he was mocking Shan Zheng. Everyone who heard this frowned, feeling that Zhao Qiansun was going too far. They feared that the situation would immediately explode into a bloody confrontation.

Shan Zheng lightly said, "Sir, you continue to try and make things difficult for me. However, I have never met you before, and do not know how I might have offended you. I would like to ask that you make things clear. If I am at fault, simply let me know and I will immediately admit my errors and offer you my apologies."

Everyone secretly supported Shan Zheng's words, feeling that he really lived up to his reputation of being a heroic, chivalric figure of Central Plains.

Zhao Qiansun said, "You didn't offend me, but you offended Little Juan. This is ten times worse than offending me!"

Shan Zheng said, "Who is 'Little Juan'? When did I offend her?" Zhao Qiansun pointed at Granny Tan. "She's Little Juan. Little Juan is her maiden name. In the whole wide world, no one but me can address her like that." Shan Zheng was both angry and amused. He said, "Oh, so that is Granny Tan's maiden name. I didn't know. Please forgive me for any offense I may have given." Zhao Qiansun said in a haughty, supercilious voice, "As you didn't know, we won't blame you. Your first offense is pardoned; if it happens again, you won't be." Shan Zheng said, "I have long heard of the great fame

of the married Tan family, who live in Mt. Taihang's Cavern of Flowing Clouds, but never had the karmic fortune to meet them. I have never gossiped about anyone behind their back. How could I have offended the granny of the Tan family?"

Zhao Qiansun angrily said, "Earlier, I was asking Little Juan, 'has your life been happy recently?' But before she had a chance to reply, your five precious sons swaggered on in and barged their way into our midst, interrupting her response. Even to this very moment, she hasn't had a chance to reply to me. Brother Shan, why don't you go and ask what type of person Little Juan is? Or what type of person I, 'Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhou Wu Zheng Wang', am? Are we the type of people who would allow others to disrupt our conversations just like that?" [All of the eight words from 'Zhao' to 'Wang' are surnames; Zhao Qiansun's own name is made up of three surnames, which is why Qiao Feng doesn't believe it could be his real name.]

Upon hearing these bizarre words, Shan Zheng realized that this fellow really wasn't very bright. He said, "Brother, there's something I don't understand, and I hope you can enlighten me." Zhao Qiansun said, "What is it? If I'm in a good mood, I suppose I can help you with a few pointers." Shan Zheng said, "Many thanks, many thanks. Sir, you said that you are the only person in the whole world who can address Granny Tan by her maiden name, right?" Zhao Qiansun said, "Right on! If you don't believe me, call her maiden name out again, and see if I, 'Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhou Wu Zheng Wang, Feng Chen Chu Wei, Jiang Shen Han Yang,' won't get into a big fight with you right now!" Shan Zheng said, "Brother, I naturally wouldn't dare to call her name again. But can it be that even Grandpa Tan is not allowed to call her by her maiden name?"

Zhao Qiansun's face turned a ghastly pale color. For a long moment, he did not respond. Everyone thought to themselves that these words of Shan Zheng had stupefied

him. Astoundingly, Zhao Qiansun suddenly burst into sobs, as his tears and snot criss-crossed into a pitiable, heart-broken appearance.

This was wildly outside of everyone's expectations. This person feared neither heaven nor hell, and had seemed determined to squabble with the Iron Faced Judge to the very end. Surprisingly, just these few simple words caused him to break into a large cryfest which he seemed unable to end.

Seeing how heartbroken Zhao Qiansun was, Shan Zheng began to feel embarrassed. The fury which had curdled up in his heart immediately vanished away. He instead began to console Zhao Qiansun, saying, "Brother Zhao, I'm the one at fault here." Zhao Qiansun sobbed and whimpered, "My surname isn't Zhao." Startled, Shan Zheng asked, "Sir, what is your surname then?" Zhao Qiansun replied, "I don't have one. Don't ask, don't ask anymore."

Everyone guessed that Zhao Qiansun must have an extremely painful subject that would be awkward to discuss. As to what it was, since he refused to say, it would be inappropriate for others to ask. All they could do was to let him continue to cry, sob, and weep without stopping.

With a composed look on her face, Granny Tan said, "You've gone crazy again. You are in front of so many friends. Aren't you afraid of losing face at all?"

Zhao Qiansun said, "You cast me off, then went off and married this good-for-nothing Grandpa Tan. How can I not be miserable and pained? My heart is shattered, and my guts have been splintered. Why would I care about such a small thing as face?"

All the onlookers glanced at each other and smiled. None of them were surprised at the revelation. Clearly, Zhao Qiansun and Granny Tan once shared a romantic history together. When Granny Tan married Grandpa Tan, Zhao Qiansun became so heartbroken that he threw away his very name and would go into insane fits of silliness. The Tan

couple were clearly in their sixties. How could it be that Zhao Qiansun was still this passionate, still this heartbroken despite the passage of decades? Granny Tan's face was covered with wrinkles, and her white hair was desolate and dreary. No one present could see how this large and tall old lady, even in her youth, could have caused Zhao Qiansun to be so passionate about her to this very day.

A bashful look appeared on Granny Tan's face. She said, "Martial-brother, why do you keep on bringing up these bygone affairs? Today, the Beggars' Clan has important matters to discuss. Be well-behaved and just listen, alright?"

These gently persuasive words were very comfortable to Zhao Qiansun's ears. He said, "If you smile at me, I'll listen to you." Before Granny Tan had a chance to smile, ten or so bystanders already burst into laughter. Granny Tan didn't seem to notice at all, and smiled directly at him. Zhao Qiansun stared at her as though stupefied. Clearly, he had been totally dazed by her smile, and it was as though his very soul had been frozen.

Grandpa Tan sat off to one side, face filled with fury, but there was nothing he could do. Watching this scene, Duan Yu's heart suddenly trembled. He thought to himself, "The love and passion between these three people is so strong that they don't pay a care to the fact that others are here and watching. I...I...in the future, in the future, will I and Miss Wang be the way Zhao Qiansun and Granny Tan are? No! No! Granny Tan clearly holds great affection towards her martial-brother. But the person whom Miss Wang constantly thinks about is her cousin, Murong Fu. Compared to Zhao Qiansun, I am far inferior to him, and my situation is much worse."

Qiao Feng, on the other hand, was thinking about something else. "So Zhao Qiansun is a false name after all. I've always heard it said that Granny Tan and Grandpa Tan were disciples of the master of the Taihang sect. But judging from the words these three have said, it seems as though

they don't come from the same school after all. Does Grandpa Tan belong to the Taihang school, or does Granny Tan belong to the Taihang school? If Grandpa Tan is the one who belongs to the Taihang sect, then which sect did Granny Tan and this Zhao Qiansun fellow come from?"

Zhao Qiansun said, "I heard that Gusu's Murong family produced a Murong Fu, who 'uses the opponent's skills, exercising them upon the opponent.' I heard that he is brash and audacious, and that he wantonly murders innocents. This old man wants to go a few rounds with him and see what sort of ability that brat has, to reverse his attacks upon me, 'Zhao Qian Sun Li, Zhou Wu Zheng Wang'. Little Juan, you told me to come to Jiangnan. Naturally, I came. Much less I..."

But before he finished speaking, a person could be heard crying loudly. Weeping and bawling, the sound was absolutely identical to that of his own crying a few moments earlier. Everyone present was astonished. That person began to complain while crying, "My dear Martial-sister, how did I offend you? Why did you go marry that horrible old man Tan? This old man's been thinking about you day and night. My stomach has been stretched and my intestines have been knotted. The person I always think about is you, Martial-sister Little Juan. When our master was alive, he treated the two of us as though we were his own children. How can you face our master, after you refused to marry me and marry someone else?"

In both sound and speech pattern, the voice was absolutely identical to that of Zhao Qiansun's. If it weren't for the fact that everyone clearly saw how Zhao Qiansun was stunned and gape-mouthed, and how astonished he looked, everyone would have believed that it was he who spoke. Everyone turned to look as one. They saw that this voice came from a young maiden who wore a light red dress.

That person turned around, revealing herself to be Ah Zhu. Duan Yu, Ah Bi, and Wang Yuyan knew that Ah Zhu had

an almost divine ability to mimic the voices of others. They weren't surprised at all. But everyone else present was both amazed and amused. They all thought that after hearing this, Zhao Qiansun would go crazy with rage. Inexplicably, these words of Ah Zhu stirred his heart. He had almost stopped crying, but upon hearing her words, his eyes reddened once more, his lips drooped downwards, and once more his tears poured down his face, and he once more started bawling in tune with Ah Zhu.

Shan Zheng shook his head. In a clear voice, he said, "Although my surname is 'Shan', 'Single', I have a wife and four concubines, and my sons and grandchildren fill my home. You, Mr. Shuang Wai, have a surname 'Shuang', Double', but you are a solitary, lonely figure. This sort of affair should have been dealt with long ago. There's no point to bringing it up now. I'm afraid it's rather too late. Brother Shuang, we were invited to come to Jiangnan by the widow of the late Vice-Chief Ma of the Beggars' Clan. Did we come for the purpose of discussing your marriage and matrimonial status?" Zhao Qiansun shook his head. "No." Shan Zheng said, "In that case, it would be best if we discussed the serious business which brought us to the Beggars' Clan in the first place." Zhao Qiansun suddenly shouted out angrily, "What? The business of the Beggars' Clan is serious business, but the business between me and Little Juan is not?"

By this point, Grandpa Tan had reached the ends of his patience. He said, "Ah Hui, Ah Hui! If you don't hurry and keep him from continuing to act crazy, I won't be able to restrain myself." After hearing him address her as 'Ah Hui', everyone present realized, "So Granny Tan has another name after all. 'Little Juan' is a term which Zhao Qiansun alone uses."

Stamping her foot, Granny Tan said, "He isn't going crazy. You harmed him and made him become like this. Aren't you content yet?" Surprised, Grandpa Tan said, "I...I...I...how did

I harm him?" Granny Tan said, "I married you, you horrible old man. Naturally, my martial-brother feels miserable about it.." Grandpa Tan said, "When you married me, I was neither horrible nor old." Granny Tan angrily said, "Have you no shame? Are you claiming that in the past, you were handsome and graceful?"

Elder Xu and Shan Zheng looked at each other, shaking their heads. They thought that these three babies were old, but not at all dignified or mature. The three of them were all senior members of the wulin with a great deal of personal prestige, and yet they were now squabbling over the passions of their youth in front of so many people. It was truly ridiculous.

Elder Xu let out a cough. "Father and son of Mt. Taishan, husband and wife of Mt. Taihang, and this friend as well, thank you for gracing us with your presences this day. Everyone in our humble clan, from top to bottom, feel very honored. Madame Ma, please tell your tale, starting from the beginning."

Translated by tigergee2329

Madame Ma was originally standing still on one side with her head down, her back towards everyone. She had overheard what Elder Xu said, so she slowly turned around and in a quiet voice said: "My husband was unfortunate and passed away, I only know how to curse my fate at not being able to born any children to continue the Ma bloodline..." Her voice although quiet, yet clear, caused the words that entered the ears of everyone who heard to shed tears. Her tone until this point was emotional, but now it seemed to be choked by tears. All the heroes in the forest after hearing her talked was touched all the way to their soul. With one cry Zhao Qiansun made everyone laughed, Ah Zhu made everyone amazed, but Madame Ma made everyone sorrowful.

Madame Ma continued, "After I had buried my husband, I went through the belongings he left behind, in the place

with the Buddhist scriptures there was a letter that was sealed with wax. On the cover of the letter it was written: "In case that I died peacefully, burn this letter immediately. If opened, then my soul in heaven (yellow river) will not be able to rest in peace. But if I died in a suspicious manner, this letter must be handed over to all the Beggars' Clan elders to read together. This matter is of utmost importance, must not be failed."

When Madame Ma talked to this point, the entire forest was quiet, a needle falling to the ground could still be heard. She paused for a moment then continued, "I saw that since my husband wrote seriously thus, I know this matter is important so I immediately searched for Bangzhu to hand over this letter. It was coincidence that Bangzhu along with the clan elders are at Jiangnan regarding matters of revenge for my dead husband. Because of that I have not yet been able to hand over the letter.

People there noticed a different shift in her tone, emphasizing "coincidence" and then "because of that". Together everyone looked at Qiao Feng from the corner of their eyes.

Qiao Feng all afternoon had dealt with the devious plot directed at himself, although he had suppressed Quan Guanqing and the clan elders' rebellion, he has not yet put this matter to rest. Now after he heard Madame Ma speak, he now felt lighter inside than before, his complexion calm and thought to himself, "Whatever plot these people are planning, come out and say it and be done with it. In this lifetime I have never done anything to be ashamed of so why would I be scared of someone trying to slander me."

Madame Ma continued, "I know that this letter has implications to the clan, and since Bangzhu and clan elders were not at Luoyang, I dare not delay so I immediately went to Zhengzhou to see Elder Xu and ask him to take charge of this matter. As for what this matter is.. Elder Xu, please explain to everyone here.

Elder Xu coughed a few times before speaking, "This matter if spoken out loud involves matters of gratitude and grudges. I foresee that the consequences are very hard to imagine." Those few sentences conveyed a deep worrisome meaning. He slowly opened a clothe bag from his shoulders, took out the letter, and said "This is the will of Ma Dayuan. Great ancestors, grandfather, and father of Dayuan, many generations have belonged to the Beggars' Clan, and had been if not clan elders then at least eight bags members. I knew Ma Dayuan since he was little and am very familiar with handwritings of his. The words on this letter are definitely Ma Dayuan's handwriting. When Madame Ma handed me this letter, the wax seal on it has not been touched. I was afraid it held important matters and dare not delay it so I opened it immediately without waiting for the other elders. When opening the letter, the Iron Faced Judge of Mt. Taishan Shan Zheng was there as witness."

Shan Zheng spoke up, "What he said was true. I was there to visit Elder Xu at that moment when he opened the letter."

Elder Xu opened the envelop taking out the letter and said, "I examined the letter inside and saw that it was not written by Ma Dayuan and was a little surprised. The beginning of the letter was to: Brother Jiantong, and this is even more weird. Jiantong is the name of Wang Bangzhu, the former Bangzhu of the Beggars' Clan. If the person who wrote this letter was not a good friend of his, then they would not address him as such. Moreover Wang Bangzhu had passed away for a long time, so who would write a letter to him? At this point I have not yet read what was written in the letter but immediately skipped to the end to see the name on the signature. Upon reading it I was even more surprised. At that point I couldn't contain myself and exclaimed 'So it was him!' Brother Shan was curious and peeked his head over to see and also exclaimed 'So it was him!'"

Shan Zheng nodded his head hinting that it happened exactly like that.

Zhao Qiansun sneaked in, "Mister Shan, what you did was not right. This is a secret letter of the Beggars' Clan. You are not a one-bag member of the clan, nor a two-bag, nor even a lowly street beggar who goes around asking for food. How come you dared to peek at a secret letter belonging to others?" Everyone there thought that he was like a madman but now he actually made sense. Shan Zheng's face turned red and hurriedly said, "I... I only looked at the signature at the end of the letter and not what was actually written in that letter." Zhao Qiansun replied, "If one stole one thousand gold one is a thief, if one stole one copper one is still a thief. The amount of money is different. But stealing a large amount is still stealing and stealing a small amount is still stealing. Sneaking a glance at a letter belonging to others is not an act of a gentleman. If you are not a gentleman then you are a shameless person, and a shameless person is someone everyone should look down upon. If you are already a shameless person then you deserved to die."

Shan Zheng raised his hand to keep his five sons from acting rashly. Just let him talk nonsense and see where this goes. Though he was boiling on the inside, he calmly thought to himself that there was something more to this, and asked himself, "This person just met me and he's already trying to stir up trouble, did he already have a grudge with me from the past perchance? In Jianghu there are not many who don't give face to the name Taishan Shan Jia. Why can't I figure it out?"

Everyone else was waiting for Elder Xu to say the name of the person in the letter to see what kind of person he is that caused Elder Xu and Shan Zheng to both be shocked. While they all were trying to think of this matter, Zhao Qiansun started speaking out of turn with some other nonsense causing many people to stare at him in anger.

Granny Tan suddenly spoke up, "What is everyone looking at? Every word my senior martial brother said was the truth." Zhao Qiansun saw Granny Tan spoke up for him, felt ecstatic inside, and said, "Everyone look here, even Lian Xiaojuan agrees, so how can I be in the wrong. Whatever Lian Xiaojuan had said or done in the past had never been wrong."

But suddenly another but shockingly similar voice to Zhao Qiansun cut in, "That is right. Whatever Lian Xiaojuan says or does has never been wrong. She married Grandpa Tan, and did not marry me... she did not married wrong at all!" The person who said that was A'Zhu. Starting at the moment when Zhao Qiansun talked bad about Murong Fu, she was still holding a grudge inside so she couldn't help herself from making fun of him. Zhao Qiansun after hearing that didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and fell victim to the specialty of the Murong family move, turning one's special move against them. [I don't know how to translate this idiom. Help??]

Immediately there were two faces looking at A'Zhu intimately and full of approval, on the right there was Grandpa Tan's and on the left there was Shan Zheng's.

A person's shadow flashed and Granny Tan jumped in front of A'Zhu with a raised palm and slapped her hard in the face and piqued, "Whether I marry right or wrong, what does it have to do with a lowly servant girl like you?" She raised her hand very fast that even though A'Zhu wanted to dodge it, she couldn't. Another person even if next to her wouldn't even be fast enough step in to help. A loud squeak of pain was heard and on the powder white face of A'Zhu there was a purple hand print.

Zhao Qiansun laughed out loud, "This smelly girl deserved her lesson. Who told her to be gossipy about other people's business."

A'Zhu with tears running down her cheeks started crying out loud. Grandpa Tan stepped up and stuck his hand into

his pocket pulling out a small jade box, opened it, and started spreading ointment onto the face of A'Zhu. Granny Tan slapped her skillfully and quickly, raising her palm and pulling it back in just a single motion. Grandpa Tan applying ointment to her face had to use many different motions but it was even faster than Granny Tan's slap. A'Zhu didn't even get a chance to move and the ointment was already on her face, her bruised face suddenly started to heal and feel better. At the same time in her left hand she was holding something. She opened her palm to see a small jade box, seeing that, she knew that Grandpa Tan just gave her a box of special ointment to treat her injury. A'Zhu, as soon as she started crying had suddenly started smiling.

Elder Xu had no reason to pay attention to Granny Tan bicker with Grandpa Tan, so he lowered his voice and continued, "My brothers! As for the person who wrote this letter, I can not say at this moment. I have been in the Beggars' Clan for over seventy years, have retired to live in seclusion for thirty years and no longer have any dealings with business in Jianghu. I don't have any conflicts with people nor do people have enmities with me. I have lived in this world for a long time, yet I don't have any children nor do I have any students thus I harbor no hidden bias nor agenda. I am about to say a few words, will you all be able to believe what I say?" The group of beggars all said together, "If we don't trust Elder Xu then who can we trust?"

Elder Xu turned around and looked at Qiao Feng and asked, "What say you Bangzhu?" Qiao Feng replied, "I have always respected Elder Xu, elder should know this already."

Elder Xu then continued, "After reading this letter, I felt both hurt and anger in my heart. I had doubts that I am mistaken and erred in my thinking so I immediately showed it to Brother Shan Zheng. Everyone must keep in mind that Brother Shan and the person who wrote this letter have always been intimate with each other. He can recognize the handwriting of that person. This matter has important

implications so I needed to ask Brother Shan to examine this letter to see if it is true or false.”

Shan Zheng looked forward and stared at Zhao Qiansun implying, “Do you have anything more to say?” Zhao Qiansun replied, “If Elder Xu showed the letter to you, then of course you have a right to look at it. However it still doesn’t dismiss the fact that the first time you saw it, it was because you sneaked a peek. No different from a thief swearing in front of Buddha that he will never steal again, and even though he changed his ways, it still doesn’t wash away the fact that he was once a thief.”

Elder Xu, paid no attention to Zhao Qiansun trying to stir up trouble, and continued talking, “Brother Shan! Will Brother Shan please announce to everyone here whether this letter is real or fake?”

Shan Zheng replied, “The person who wrote this letter and I are good friends and have exchanged letters with each other for many years. In my house I still kept many of his old letters, so I led Elder Xu and Madame Ma back to my place to compare them. Not only the handwriting matches, but also the envelope and the wax seal were all of one kind and do not leave any doubt as to who wrote the letter.”

Elder Xu said, “I won’t live for much longer so everything that I do, I must be careful. Especially since this matter has important implications to the Beggars’ Clan and the reputation and name of a hero, how could I dare be reckless and take liberty of the matter.”

After hearing him say that, everyone turned their faces to look at Qiao Feng, knowing immediately that the hero that he was implying were Qiao Bangzhu himself. With that being said, no one dared to look at him straight in the eyes opting instead to look down at the ground when their eyes meet.

Elder Xu continued, “I knew that the Tan husband and wife living on Mt. Taishan and the person who wrote the letter knew each other for many years, so I paid a visit to Cavern of Flowing Clouds. Grandpa Tan and Granny Tan

shared with me everything to confirm this matter. I truly didn't dare to come straight out and talk about this matter by myself."

At this time everyone realized that Elder Xu invited the Tan husband and wife and Shan Zheng here to testify and serve as witnesses.

Elder Xu then continued, "At that time Granny Tan said that she has a martial brother that can bear first hand witness to this matter. If we can invite him to testify his account then everything can become clear. This person is Mister Zhao Qiansun. But this person acts differently and more eccentric than the average person, he won't accept just anybody's invitation. But he still holds Granny Tan in high regard. As soon as her invitation letter arrives, Zhao Qiansun immediately agreed to come..."

Grandpa Tan suddenly got angry and stared at Granny Tan then asked, "What?? You were the one to ask him to come? Why didn't you tell me first before you two carried out covert exchanges behind my back?" Granny Tan became angry and shouted back, "What is this 'covert exchanges' you mentioned? I wrote a letter and asked Elder Xu to send someone to deliver it. That is the right and honorable thing that I did befitting a wife. You have a perchance for pointless jealousy, if you knew then you will nag incessantly about it bringing down the house, so that's why I chose not to tell you." Grandpa Tan replied, "Hiding something from your husband violates the moral ethics of husband and wife, and that is not right!"

Granny Tan was not in the mood to argue more, moved her palm and punched him in the middle of his face. Grandpa Tan, although his martial arts were higher than his wife, didn't block nor did he dodge, just stood still for his wife to hit him. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box to rub ointment onto his face to stop the swelling. The person who struck was fast, but the person

who applied ointment was even faster. The anger of this husband and wife caused everyone to find it ridiculous.

Zhao Qiansun seeing this, gave a long sigh and in a sad hurt voice said, "So that's how it is. So that's how it is. So regretful. If I had known sooner then in the past I would have allowed her to slap me around a few times. Not a difficult thing to do." His voice was full of regret.

Granny Tan replied in an equally regretful voice, "Who told you to hit me back when I hit you in the past? You never once yielded to me."

Zhao Qiansun looked up in a dumb looking stupor, started to reminisce the old times about a certain martial sister with a volatile temper. A misstep around her and one would be on defense all day. Every time he got hit for a nonsense reason, he could not endure nor yield so back and forth they go thus killing any chance for love before it had a chance to mature. Now seeing Grandpa Tan withstood her beating without a sound, he was finally enlightened, and now repented bitterly with a heart full of grief. Over the past few decades, he was bitter at his martial sister for choosing another man, thinking it was due to some significant reason, but who would have thought that his rival's only advantage was that he was willing to serve as her whipping post. "Oy, if I only had known back then, I would let her hit me more then she would be satisfied."

Elder Xu spoke up, "Mister Zhao Qiansun!! Please give some input and say to everyone whether the contents of this letter is true or false."

Zhao Qiansun, still lost in his thought, muttered, "I am such an idiot, at that time why couldn't I figure it out? Studying martial arts are for beating enemies, beating evil, beating lowlife bastards, who would have thought to use it for beating a loved one, beating the person of your dreams. If being beaten was love, being scolded was love, being slapped around was love, then what was such a big deal that I couldn't endure it back then."

Everyone seeing him so infatuated found it slightly touching yet also ridiculous. The Beggars' Clan is facing an important matter that needs to be resolved. Elder Xu had invited this person from afar to testify, but who knew this person turned out to be a lovestruck fool, can what he has to say be taken seriously?

Elder Xu reminded him, "Mister Zhao Qiansun, we all asked you here so you can talk about what is in this letter."

Zhao Qiansun replied, "Oh right, right, elder is asking about the matter in the letter right? That letter though short, is full of meaning: forty years ago we were fellow students, the memories still fresh. Every time little sister thinks back, I start missing those days. Although martial brother's head is now gray, your smiling face is no different from years past..." Elder Xu was asking about the letter Ma Dayuan left behind, but he actually recited Granny Tan's letter that he memorized by heart.

Elder Xu was speechless and not knowing what to do, turned to Granny Tan and said, "Madame Tan! Madame please ask him to cooperate."

Granny Tan witnessed Zhao Qiansun surprisingly take an ordinary letter of hers and recited it fluently by heart, knew in her soul that he must have read that letter forward and backward many times. She was very touched and sweetly said, "Martial brother! Martial brother, please talk about the situation at that time."

Zhao Qiansun replied, "I remembered that scene like it was still in front of my eyes, the memories of it were like it happened yesterday. Martial sister had combed your hair into two braids, each one tied by a red string. That day Shifu taught us the move Stealing Dragon Switching Phoenix...."

Granny Tan slowly shook her head and said, "Martial brother, Elder Xu is not asking about our past. Martial brother once had participated in the bloody battle at Shi Guqian (Quarry Stone Valley) outside Yanmen Guan Pass.

Martial brother please tell everyone what the situation was like at that time.”

Zhao Qiansun shakely said, “Outside Yanmen Guan Pass? At Quarry Stone Valley... I... I....” His complexion suddenly changed color. He suddenly turned towards the southwest direction where there wasn’t a single soul and started running away. His lightness skill was strong and fast. He ran all the way into the forest and it would be hard for anyone to catch him so everyone started to yell “Mister Zhao Qiansun! Don’t run! Please come back!” Zhao Qiansun paid no heed and ran even harder.

Suddenly there was a loud ringing voice, “Martial brother’s head is now gray, your smiling face is now crooked, different from years past...” Zhao Qiansun immediately halted, turned around and asked, “Who said that?” That other person continued, “If it is not so then why upon seeing Grandpa Tan do you feel inferior, turn tail and run away?” Everyone looked to see who spoke, and it was Quan Guanqing.

Zhao Qiansun angrily yelled back, “Who felt inferior? His kungfu is only good for standing there to take punishment and not hit back. How is that better than me?”

All of a sudden on the other side of the forest an old man’s voice was heard, “Taking punishment but not dishing it back is the hardest kungfu to learn under heaven. It is not simple, no?”

Chapter 16: Old Gratitudes and Past Grievances; Friends in the Morning Becomes Foes at Midday

Fan translation by tigergee2329 and forgot password
[Second Edition]

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Translated by tigergee2329

Everyone turned their heads and looked behind the apricot trees. A square faced, big-eared monk, dignified in appearance wearing an ash colored robe, stepped out. Elder Xu cried, "Reverend Zhiguang from Mt. Tiantai has arrived! Thirty years since we last met, Reverend still look as healthy as ever."

Reverend Zhiguang's reputation was not well known in recent years so many of the latter generations of the Beggars' Clan do not know his name. But Qiao Feng and the six clan elders all stood up and paid him respect, having known of his reputation from before. In the past, the Reverend had sailed the seas to deserted lands and islands looking for medicinal herbs to treat malaria and other illnesses for the common people in the Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong and Guangxi area. Because of this, the Reverend had caught an illness himself and lost his martial arts, thus the gratitudes of the common people for his deeds are not small. Many people came up to salute him.

Reverend Zhiguang turned to Zhao Qiansun, smiled and said, "Wugong that is inferior to the opponent when attacked, wanting to retaliate is already hard. Wugong that is superior to the opponent when attacked, and choose not retaliate is even harder." Zhao Qiansun lowered his head as if pondering what was said.

Elder Xu said, "Reverend Zhiguang's brilliant wisdom and benevolent grace are so widespread that no one dares to

disrespect. In the past ten years Reverend had not involved yourself with any business in Jianghu, but today you grace us with your presence and bringing the Beggars' Clan great honor. I am deeply grateful."

Reverend Zhiguang replied, "Elder Xu of the Beggars' Clan and Iron Faced Judge Shan of Mt. Taishan both asked me to come, so how can I refuse? The distance between Mt. Tiantai and Wuxi is not great, moreover this matter deals with the peace and prosperity of the common people thus I came when summoned."

Qiao Feng thought to himself, "So it turns out he was asked here by Elder Xu and Shan Zheng. Reverend Zhiguang has a reputation of high prestige and a noble character. There's no way he would be involved with the plot to harm me. Maybe with him here is a good thing."

Zhao Qiansun suddenly spoke up, "The battle at Quarry Stone Valley outside of Yanmen Guan Pass, Reverend Zhiguang also participated in it. You can speak about it first."

Reverend Zhiguang hearing the mentioned of Quarry Stone Valley caused his facial complexion to become distorted, showing an uncomfortable restlessness and a hint of fear, like a person who saw a horrible sight and can't bear to look. His face then switched to a melancholic look full of pity, let out a long sigh, and said, "The sin is really heavy, to speak of this matter brings up feelings of great shame. Everyone, the battle at Quarry Stone Valley took place thirty years ago, so why today bring up this matter?"

Elder Xu replied, "Only because our clan is facing an impending crisis involving the matter in this letter." After speaking he brought out the letter and handed it over.

Reverend Zhiguang read the letter from beginning to end, shook his head and said, "Grievances of the past should not be reopened, why bring up this old matter? According to my opinion, this letter should be destroyed so it will bring this matter to an end. That is the best solution."

Elder Xu retorted, "Vice-Chief Ma of our clan died a tragic death. If this matter is not investigated carefully then this injustice suffered by Vice-Chief Ma will never be washed away and it will lead to the disintegration of our clan."

Reverend Zhiguang could only nod his head in agreement, "What you said is true." The reverend looked up at the late afternoon sky showing the new moon shining a thin ray of light onto the apricot trees for a long time, then turned to Zhao Qiansun and said, "Okay, the mistake that I committed many years back, I won't conceal it anymore. I will be straightforward about what happened back then."

Zhao Qiansun shook his head, "A mistake is a mistake. Why continue to deceive ourselves and others."

The Reverend turned to the people gathered and spoke, "Thirty years ago, heroes of the realm of rivers and lakes (jianghu) received news that a group of Khitan warriors planned to launch a sneak attack on the Shaolin Temple to steal martial art manuals developed over the past hundreds of years..."

Everyone gasped softly thinking to themselves, "The ambitions of these Khitan warriors are not small." The unique martial art secrets of Shaolin Temple are the treasures of Great Song. Liao and Great Song had been at war with each other for many years, if these Khitans succeeded in stealing the martial art secrets of Shaolin and train their military in them, the armies of Great Song will not be able to repel their invasions.

Reverend Zhiguang continued, "This matter was a matter of great crisis. If the Khitans succeeded then Great Song would be facing a calamity with the threat of losing the country, the entire family of the Emperor will be put to the sword. The matter was urgent so our group of heroes did not have time to investigate this matter carefully. We heard that the group of Khitans will travel through Yanmen Guan Pass so beside from sending message to Shaolin to be on full alert, the group all immediately headed out to Yanmen Guan

Pass to meet the enemy. If we couldn't annihilate that group then at least we can foil their plans."

Hearing of the impending battle with the Khitans, everyone's blood started to boil. Great Song over the years had been humiliated by the armies of Liao, having lost many battles, land was invaded, and the common people suffered greatly.

Reverend Zhiguang slowly turned his head, stared at Qiao Feng and asked, "Qiao Bangzhu, if Bangzhu had known of this news then what would you have done?"

Qiao Feng dignifiedly replied, "Reverend Zhiguang! My wisdom is limited, my abilities too lacking for people to praise, even brothers in the clan suspect of them that to even speak of it brings shame. But even though I am incompetent, I still am a man, and regarding these matters of principal one knows what is right, what is wrong. Our Great Song has constantly been terrorized by the armies of Liao, this dishonor upon our country, who here has never thought of cleansing? If I had heard of news such as those, I will immediately lead brothers in our clan to travel day and night to help stop them."

Those words of his were very heroic and proud, everyone who heard was touched inside and thought to themselves, "Now that is how a true man should act."

Reverend Zhiguang nodded and said, "Since Qiao Bangzhu said that, when I headed out to Yanmen Guan Pass to ambush the Khitans, there was nothing wrong with that right?"

Qiao Feng angrily thought to himself, "Who does this old man think he is? Saying that, isn't it just like looking down on me?" However he betrayed no emotions and just calmly said, "The heroic spirit of all seniors here are fierce, I greatly admire them. I regret that I was not born thirty years earlier so that I could follow the heroes to fight the Khitans."

Reverend Zhiguang looked at him carefully once more, his facial expressions were strange, and slowly said, "At that

time we split up into small groups heading to Yanmen Guan Pass. I and this brother here..." he pointed to Zhao Qiansun and continued, "were in the first group. Our group consisted of twenty one people. Brother Leader was younger than I by a few years, however his martial arts were outstanding, and many people revered his status in the martial arts world, thus we all nominated him to be our Leader. Everyone listened to him and carried out his orders. In our group there were Wang Bangzhu of the Beggars' Clan, Ten Thousand Wins Saber, the hero Wang Laoying, the Great Sword God Priest Yun of Mt. Huashan, they were all first class martial art masters. At that time I have yet to become a monk, and to be grouped together with such heroes I felt very unworthy. Only that my desire to serve my country to kill enemies did not allow for me to be polite and stand in the rear of that group. When it comes to killing enemies and protecting the country, every little strength that can be contributed should be contributed. The martial arts of these brothers were much greater than my own, as for nowadays, as you may know there is no need to compare anymore."

Zhao Qiansun added, "That's correct! At that time my martial arts were much greater than yours. As much as this.." As he said that he spread both his arms out wide to show the difference. But seeing that the distance was still not enough, he tried spreading out his finger tips to add a few inches.

Reverend Zhiguang just continued with his story, "Our group reached Yanmen Guan Pass and waited until near dusk, then went out beyond the Great Wall ten more miles. We were on guard and very careful the whole time. Suddenly in the northwest direction we heard sounds of horses running, listening to the sound there were at least ten riders. Brother Leader raised his right hand up and all of us halted. Everyone in the group were both excited and worried, no one dared to say a word. Excited because the news were not false, and that the group arrived in time to stop the enemies.

However, also worried because everyone knows that these Khitans must be very fierce and capable to even dare attack Shaolin, who is the Mount Tai of martial art studies. If they were friendly then they wouldn't have come, but since they came they couldn't be friendly at all. These warriors must have been chosen very carefully, one chosen out of ten thousand so they must not be ordinary. Great Song had fought many battles with the Khitans, defeats were many but victories few, the outcome of the battle would be hard to imagine."

"Brother Leader waved his hands and all twenty one of us spread out around the mountain road and hid among the boulders. The left side of the mountain was a deep valley where the bottom could not even be seen."

"The sound of hoofbeats start getting nearer and nearer, there was a sound of seven to eight people together singing a song native to the the people of Liao. The singing was gracefully long, both grand and herioc, but none of us could understand its meaning. I tightened the grip on my saber, my palms were so drenched in cold sweat that I had to dry them on my pants but it soon became wet again. Brother Leader was bending down to the side of me. Knowing that I was nervous, he patted my shoulder, looked at me, and gave a smile. He made a chopping motion with his hand as if to say we will kill all of the Khitan soldiers today. I smiled back at him. Inside, I felt much calmer than before."

"When the person in the lead of the Khitan group were about fifty meters away from us, I peeked out from behind a boulder. The Khitan warriors were all wearing fur, some holding spears, some with short sabers, others with bows and arrows, and a few have large hawks perched on their shoulders. The whole group was singing as they walked, unbeknown of the ambush up ahead. In a brief second, I had taken in the appearances of the Khitans in front, they had short hair and thick beards, all looked fierce. As they got

closer, my heart was beating so furiously that it felt like it was closed to jumping out of my mouth and out my body..."

The people hearing Reverend Zhiguang telling the story, though all knew this story took place thirty years ago, they couldn't help but felt suspenseful. Reverend Zhiguang turned again to Qiao Feng and said, "Qiao Bangzhu, the success or failure of this mission will influence the safety of Great Song along with the lives of millions of people. And we still do not have a grasp on whether we will be successful. The only advantage we had was that the enemies were in the light, while we were in the dark. According to Bangzhu, what should we have done?"

Qiao Feng replied, "There is an old saying 'All's fair in war'. This matter is involving two countries at war, there's no way we can follow the heroic moral ethics code of Jianghu. The distant dogs had always slaughtered the people of Great Song, have they ever held back? In my opinion we must use concealed projectiles coated with deadly poison."

Reverend Zhiguang clapped his hand against his thigh and said, "Good! The suggestion of Qiao Bangzhu is exactly like the thinking of our group. Brother Leader seeing the Khitans had come close enough, cried out a sound, and everyone let loose their concealed weapons and projectiles. Flying out there was an abundance of steel darts, steel arrows, flying daggers, iron awls... each and everyone were all coated with deadly poison. The Liao dogs screamed out in confusion, then fell over and screamed no more..."

In the group of beggars listening, some clapped their hands and cheered.

Reverend Zhiguang continued, "At that point I had counted clearly, the group of Khitans warriors had nineteen people. Our concealed weapons had slain twelve, leaving seven still standing. Our group all to a man jumped out, raising our sabers and swords cut down all remaining in a flash. None was able to escape."

Some listening in the Beggars' Clan group cheered once more. However both Qiao Feng and Duan Yu pondered in their heads, "The reverend had said that these Khitans were all chosen carefully among the best of the best warriors, so how can their skills be so mediocre to die in such a short time?"

There was a sound of Reverend Zhiguang heaving a long sigh, "Our group just barely raised our arms and had easily killed nineteen Khitan warriors, all were ecstatic but also felt uneasy. This group was too ordinary, not a single person lasted more than one move, definitely are not skilled warriors. Was the news that we heard inaccurate? Or did the Khitans plan this so that they could trap us? We exchanged only a few words with each other before we heard the sound of a horse. In the northwest direction there were two riders coming this way."

"This time our group did not bother to ambush anymore, all headed straight to meet the enemy without consulting with anybody. Immediately we saw that the enemy included a man and a woman. The man's body was powerfully built, his facial expression was solemn. His clothing was more expensive and better looking than all those other Khitans. The woman was young looking, and in her hands was a little baby. The two people were shoulder to shoulder, smiling and talking very intimately, obviously they are husband and wife. The two upon seeing us were greatly surprised and looked around saw the corpses of those warriors all lying on the ground. The man immediately changed his countenance to a fierce and aggressive look, loudly shouting questions at us in a Khitan language that none of us understood what he was trying to say."

"Shanxi Datong government office's Iron Tower Third Brother Fang Daxiong raised his iron rod up and shouted loudly: 'You there Khitan dog, surrender and accept your fate!' He shouted and at the same time wielded his iron rod to strike down the Khitan man. Brother Leader in his

stomach felt uneasy and was about to yell out, 'Brother Fang, don't be reckless! Do not kill him. We must capture him alive to question him.'"

"Brother Leader had not finish his sentence before the Khitan's right hand had moved forward, snatching the iron rod away from Fang Daxiong. A sound of bones breaking emitted from Fang Daxiong's hands. Seeing that person was about to strike with the rod from midair down, our group started yelling out, knowing that we won't be fast enough to charge forward to save Fang Daxiong's life, thus we started shooting our hidden projectiles at the enemy. The Khitan man only needed to wave his left arm once, and a powerful wind forced all the projectiles to harmlessly land on the side. Looks like Fang Daxiong's life can no longer be saved, however, strangely, he threw the iron rod forward, sending both it and Third Brother Fang crashing out to the side of the road. His mouth mumbling, did not know what to say.

"In just one move, it caused our whole group to stand in shock, witnessing that the level of this person's martial arts are so high, that it is rare to see one of such caliber in the world. So the news that we received are not false, and fearing that following him there will be more first class masters approaching, thus we must use our large number to immediately overwhelm him. Six to seven people charged forward to attack him and four to five others moved to take on the female."

"Unexpectedly, the young married female did not know martial arts. She was slashed just once and lost her arm causing the baby in her hand to fall to the ground. Another person then hacked with a saber cutting off half of her head. The Khitan man's martial arts although high but he was also surrounded by six to seven other skilled fighters, so it was impossible for him to rush over to protect his wife and child. The first few moves he just snatched away our weapons and swords, carefully trying not to injure anybody, however when seeing his wife being killed, his eye turned blood red,

his face looked fearsome. When I saw his sight then, my hands and feet felt like lead and dared not go forward.”

Zhao Qiansun added, “Can’t blame you for feeling such! Can’t blame you for feeling such!” Ever since he talked to Granny Tan earlier, whoever talked to him were met with either crankiness or rudeness, however the sentences that he just let out seemed like its meaning was partly painful and partly regretful.

Reverend Zhiguang continued, “The fierce battle then already took place thirty years ago. Over the past thirty years I don’t know how many nightmares I had regarding that sight I saw, every image imprinted deeply in my head. The Khitan man brought both his palms forward, I don’t know what palm techniques he used, but he snatched the weapons right out of the hands of two of our brothers, same time using it to both slash and stab killing those two. He at times fought on the ground, then leaped back to continue on the saddle of his horse, bold and fast like a bird pecking a worm. He moved like a ghost or demon. That’s right, he was no different than a demon, finished killing a person to his west, he turned in a blink and killed a person to his east. In just a moment, out of twenty one people in our group, nine people had already been killed.”

“Now everyone was furious, all eyes were red. Brother Leader with Wang Bangzhu and the rest of us all jumped into the fray, willing to trade our lives for his. Shockingly his martial arts was so strange that one could not even imagine, nor could one even predict from which direction his attacks would be coming from. The setting sun in the sky was shining red like blood. There outside of Yanmen Guan Pass the northern wind blowing furiously mixed with the crying sounds of past heroes right before their death. Limbs-arms and feet, heads, weapons, blood were flying and falling all over the place. Whoever was skilled was only able to protect himself, no one was able to help another.

“Seeing the circumstances, I was truly frightened. But seeing that my brothers were falling one by one, that sight can not help but cause one’s blood to boil. I gathered all my courage, got on a horse and charge directly at him. Both my hands holding a saber aimed for his head and slashed down, knowing that if this move does not connect, then my life will be handed over to him. When the edge of the saber was barely a meter away from him, the Khitan man suddenly grabbed hold of another person and held him up to block. I shockingly looked and saw that the person being held up was the second senior from the Band of three Heroes of Jiangxi Du. I hurriedly pulled back my saber but the edge of the saber went right into the head of the horse I was riding, hitting it with a clang. The animal was in such pain that it neigh a loud sound and it jumped up. At that moment the Khitan man sent out a palm strike right at the moment the horse jumped up so that the horse took the full brunt of that strike for me. If not for that, my bones would have all been smashed and how could I have survived to this day?”

“The force of his palm strike was truly terrifying. It sent both horse and rider flying out to the back. My body flying in midair smashed right on top of some tree branches. I was stunned and fazed, not knowing where I am nor did I know whether I was alive. It was a long time before I was able to look down and saw my brothers still surrounding and fighting the Khitan man. Only five to six people were still standing. At that time I also saw this brother here...” Reverend Zhiguang pointed to Zhao Qiansun and continued, “... his body shook once, then fell into a pool of his own blood. I thought he must be dead.”

Zhao Qiansun shook his head and said, “To speak of this story I am very ashamed, but why bother hiding it anymore. It wasn’t because I was injured but because I was so scared that my heart stopped beating. I saw that person holding brother Du’s two legs and tearing his whole body in half. I was so dizzy that I fell unconscious only because of that

reason. That's right I am a coward. Seeing that person killed so many people that I became unconscious."

Reverend Zhiguang spoke again, "The Khitan man was deadly like a devil while killing numerous brothers. Whoever says that they did not feel fear are being deceitful." He then looked up and stared at the moon hanging from the sky for a time then continued, "At that point our side only still had four people still fighting the Khitan man. Brother Leader knowing that the end was near, knowing that all will die, opened his mouth asking: 'Who are you? Who are you?' The other person did not reply. In just a few moment he killed two more people. He then drew out his right foot and it hit Wang Bangzhu right on the vital pressure points on his back, while his left foot went out to finish the move 'Twin Ducks Linking Together' [not sure if this is the correct name for it. Help??] hitting Brother Leader's vital pressure point on his ribs. He used his legs to hit the pressure points precisely and powerfully knocking them out. His footwork was so impressive it was unthinkable. If I was not almost on death's door then, seeing the two people I respect most being seriously wounded, a scream would have escaped my mouth."

"The Khitan man finished taking care of all his enemies then rushed over to the side of his dead wife's body, holding it while crying, and let out a loud mournful cry for a long time. Hearing his weeping sounds I could barely withstand the sadness. Surprised to see the Khitan dog who was as cruel as a devil could also show a sorrowful sentiment resembling a human, no different from the sound of those of our Han people."

Zhao Qiansun coldly said, "If that is so then what is so strange about it? Even wild animals have parent-child, husband-wife sentimental relationships, how is that any different than a human's? The Khitans are still humans, how are they any different than Hans?"

In the group of Beggars' Clan, someone screamed out, "Liao dogs are evil and cruel, even worse than poisonous snakes and wild beasts. Our Han people are entirely different!" Zhao Qiansun could only smile bitterly and did not answer those words.

Reverend Zhiguang went on with his story, "The Khitan man sat there and cried, both holding tight and looking at his son for a long time. Then he placed his son into the bosom of his dead wife and walked over to where Brother Leader's body lay. He let loose his anger by screaming and scolding at Brother Leader. Brother Leader did not submit but just glowered at him. His pressure points were hit, his movements and speech were sealed. He could not even mutter a word. The Khitan man suddenly raised his head and let loose a long scream. He picked up a saber from the ground and started carving words on the face of the mountain. At that time it was dark and I was lying far away so I could not see what was written."

Zhao Qiansun said, "He was carving words in Khitan. Even if you could see it you still wouldn't be able to read it."

Reverend Zhiguang replied, "That is right. Even if I saw it I could not read it. On the cliff it was silent on all sides, the only sound heard was that of the saber carving into the stone. Listening to the sound of stone chips falling down, I dared not to even breathe hard. I did not know how long it was before he finally threw down the saber. He bent down to pick up his wife's corpse and son, then walked to the edge of the cliff and jumped to the bottom of the canyon."

Everyone hearing that couldn't help but let out an "Ah" sound. It was unexpected that the story would turn out so.

Reverend Zhiguang continued, "Everyone hearing this retelling must be surprised. At that time with my own eyes witnessing that, I was even more shocked. A person with a high level of martial arts as him living in the Kingdom of Liao must have a high rank. This time when the group of Khitan warriors coming south of the Yellow River to attack Shaolin

Temple, if he is not their Leader then at least he must be one of their important characters. He had captured our group's leader along with Wang Bangzhu, and the rest were all killed. It seems like he had won. Who would have thought that he would jump down the cliff to commit suicide instead of taking advantage of his victory and moving forward with his mission."

"I looked downward and all I could see were clouds and fog. The bottom could not be seen. He is still made of flesh and blood. No matter how powerful his martial arts are, to jump from such height there's no way one could survive. I startled myself and could not bear but called out a cry. Turns out in this weird event there's another even weirder. I had just finished yelling when there was a sound of a baby crying. From the bottom of the cliff a black bundle flew up and landed right on top of the body of Wang Bangzhu. The sound of a baby crying did not stop but continued. It seems the bundle that landed on Wang Bangzhu was the little baby from earlier. At that point I had stopped being scared, and jumped down from the tree. I ran up to Wang Bangzhu and saw that the Khitan baby was lying on top of him still crying."

"I thought to myself for a bit before I understood fully what happened. When the Khitan woman was killed, the baby she was holding fell to the ground causing the baby to fall unconscious and stopped breathing, but not entirely dead yet. The Khitan man when he was crying sorrowfully, touched his son's nose and saw that he was not breathing so thought that the son had died. Thus he carried the two corpses and jumped down the cliff to die together. The sudden shock jolted the baby back to life and started crying. The Khitan man's skills were shockingly scary. He doesn't want his son to be buried with him at the bottom of the valley, so he immediately used his strength and threw the baby up. He remembered the exact distance and location to throw the baby to land exactly on top of Wang

Bangzhu without harming the child. That Khitan man when falling in midair, found out his baby was alive. He was quick-witted enough to react and throw the baby up. His skills to be able to throw something that far and that accurate and calculate the exact distance, is formidably fearsome.”

“I looked around at the brothers that died tragic deaths, inside I was sorrowful and angry, grabbed the baby and planned to throw it against the mountain wall for it to die. Just as I raised my hands to throw, the baby started crying, the face was pulsing red, the bright black eyes were wide staring back at me. If I hadn’t looked into the baby’s eyes I would have threw him already, and that would be the end of the story. However I had seen the eyes of that small child. The child seemed so lovable and innocent that I could no longer follow through. I thought to myself: ‘if I had bullied and kill the baby not yet a year old then that would be a disgraceful deed, not the act of an upright and respectable gentleman’.”

In the group of the Beggars’ Clan, a beggar shouted out, “Reverend Zhiguang! The Liao dogs killed and murder our Han people countless of times. With my own eyes I saw Han babies being speared, and carried around upon a lance on top of a horse to parade around town showing off. If they can kill babies, so why can’t we?”

Reverend Zhiguang let out a long sigh and replied, “That is right. But as the saying goes the darkness in the hearts of man, who here does not have it. That day I saw that the dead were already too many. I couldn’t bring myself to add more to it by killing a little baby. Everyone can say what I did was wrong, everyone can say what I did was cowardly. But in the end I still let the baby live.”

“After that I went to release the blocked pressure points of Brother Leader and Wang Bangzhu, but my skills were mediocre and plus the pressure point hitting techniques of the Khitan man were top notch, no matter how much strength I exerted, how much I pressed, how much I rubbed

or squeezed, I only succeeded in drowning myself in my own sweat. No matter what I did, Brother Leader and Wang Bangzhu still could not move nor speak. I did not know what else to do and fearing the Khitans will soon come to help so I threw both Brother Leader and Wang Bangzhu onto two horses. I myself rode a horse holding the Khitan baby in one arm while the reins of the other two horses in the other and ran all night away from Yanmen Guan Pass to look for a doctor specializing in releasing blocked pressure points, but that was useless. The next night after twelve hours have passed, the pressure points released voluntarily.”

“Brother Leader and Wang Bangzhu were still worried about the Khitan warriors coming to attack Shaolin, so they immediately returned to Yanmen Guan Pass to scout out the situation. However they only saw flesh and blood left all over from the fight before. The sight was no different from how I left it. I looked down the cliff at the Quarry Stone Valley and still could not find any clues. We all planned to prepare the corpses of our brothers for burial, but when we counted, there were only seventeen dead bodies. The number of people that should have died should be eighteen so why is it that we are now missing one?” He stopped talking then looked directly at Zhao Qiansun questioningly.

Zhao Qiansun remembering smiled and said, “In that bunch there was one corpse that had the ability to come back from the dead and able to walk around to this day. That living corpse is I, Zhao Qian Sun Li Zhou Wu Zheng Wang. [name’s a fake... see Ren Wo Xing's explanation below]

[Ren Wo Xing’s Note:

Both the 'name' (undoubtedly fake) Zhao Qiansun as well as the following 'Li Zhou Wu Zheng Wang' comes from the ancient Chinese text, 'the Hundred Family Surnames', '百家姓', which is an ancient 'poem' composed solely of Chinese surnames.

The first three surnames in this poem are 'Zhao', 'Qian', and 'Sun'; the next five are 'Li', 'Zhou', 'Wu', 'Zheng', and

'Wang'.

Thus, 'Zhao Qiansun' is obviously a nonsense name to begin with, and calling himself 'Li Zhou Wu Zheng Wang' is just even more nonsense.]

Reverend Zhiguang said, "At that time the three of us thought nothing of it, thinking to ourselves that during that fight, this brother here might have died and fallen down the cliff. So not seeing his corpse we did not linger too much on this. After we had properly buried all the brothers, we were all furious inside, so we threw all the Khitan corpses over the side of the cliff down into the Stone Quarry Valley. Brother Leader said to Wang Bangzhu: 'Brother Jiantong, that Khitan man if he wanted to kill the two of us it would be as easy as turning his hand, so why did he just kicked us in our pressure points and allow us to live to now?' Wang Banzhu replied: 'I have been thinking of that but still can not figure it out. The two of us were part of the people responsible for killing his wife and son, it is only right that he should have ruthlessly killed the both of us.'"

(Briefly edited by Sirian)

"The three of us discussed back and forth but could not think of a logical reason for what happened. Brother Leader then spoke up: 'He must have carved those letters into the stone with some hidden intent. What a shame that none of us three knows the Khitan language.' Brother Leader went down to the river and gathered some water to mix with the blood on the ground making ink. Then he colored it all over the stone. After that he imprinted the cliff writing onto a piece of white cloth torn from a gown. The Khitan used only a small saber but were able to carve letters two inches deep into the stone. With this kind of internal power, his skills must have been unparalleled in the world, unmatched by anyone. Looking at the writing the three of us were secretly amazed. The memory of the day before still left a lingering fear in all of us. Returning back inside the Great Wall, Wang Bangzhu went to find a peddler who travels between there

and Liao. Since that person knew the Khitan language we gave him the white cloth to read. He translated it out for us on paper.”

Zhiguang stopped speaking, looked up at the sky. He sighed and then continued, “After the three of us read the paper, all we could do was look wide-eyed back and forth at each other. We couldn’t believe it. The Khitan man had at that time made up his mind to kill himself, so why would he intentionally lie? We then went to find another person who reads Khitan and had him translate it by mouth one line at a time. What he said was exactly like the previous translation. God! If that was the truth then seventeen of our brothers had died a meaningless death. Those Khitan warriors had committed no crimes and were wrongfully implicated. As for that pair of husband and wife, towards them we had committed a great sin that could never be undone.”

Everyone was eagerly waiting to hear the words that were written on the mountain face, but Zhiguang was silent and had stopped talking. People’s impatience caused their tempers to flare and they irritably asked: “What did those words say?” “What sins had you committed towards them?” “Why do you feel regret towards the husband and wife?”

Zhiguang replied, “My good friends, it is not because I want to keep the meaning of those Khitan words a secret, but it is because if those words that were written were true, then all the actions of Brother Leader, Wang Bangzhu, and even mine were greatly in the wrong. We are too ashamed to face anybody. I am only a lowly common person in Jianghu, even if I did wrong it will not impact anything in the grand scheme of things. However regarding Brother Leader and Wang Bangzhu, they are different from me, what kind of rank and status do they hold? Moreover Wang Bangzhu had passed away. I do not dare to say anything that might ruin the reputation and prestige of these two people. I beg you all for forgiveness. I cannot say it.”

The previous bangzhu of the Beggars' Clan was Wang Jiantong whose reputation and prestige were widespread. From Qiao Feng to clan elders to various disciples, all held deep gratuities toward him. The members of the Beggars' Clan were extremely curious about the story but upon hearing that this matter has implications toward the reputation and prestige of Wang Bangzhu not a single person dared to inquire further.

Zhiguang continued talking, "The three of us thought for a time, at first not wanting to believe it, but were forced to accept it so we decided to temporarily spare the life of the Khitan baby. We decided that we first off should head to Shaolin to see if there were any new developments. If the Khitan warriors actually did attack Shaolin then we could still kill the baby then. We rushed day and night toward Shaolin without stopping. Arriving there we saw that the number of heroes that had gathered at Shaolin to lend a hand was not small. The news involved the life and death of millions of common citizens, so all it needed was for the news to spread and numerous people came to help."

Reverend Zhiguang turned his face from left to right looking at each person listening and then continued, "There were many heroes and revered seniors that came to the gathering at Shaolin that year. I need not go into detail about that. Everyone was on full alert and ready, guarding the temple very tightly. More and more heroes from all corners of the land gathered as time passed. From September at the time of Mid Autumn Moon Festival all the way to December, three months passed without a single enemy movement. To further investigate the matter, we planned to look for the person who originally spread these news, however we could no longer find any traces of this person. Only then did we conclude that the news were actually false and that we all had been tricked. Both sides had suffered tragic and unnecessary deaths in the battle outside of Yanmen Guan Pass."

“However not long after, Khitan calvary started invading Hebei so the matter about the Khitan warriors coming to attack Shaolin was soon forgotten. It did not matter whether they did or didn’t come, after all no matter what, the Khitans were still the mortal enemies of our Great Song.”

“Brother Leader, Wang Bangzhu, and I all felt ashamed and regretful about the situation outside Yanmen Guan Pass. The only people we told about it to was the Abbot of Shaolin and the families of the people who had died. We did not tell another soul except for those people. As for the Khitan baby, he was given into the care of a family of farmers living at the base of Mount Song. The matter had already passed and deciding how to deal with the baby was quite difficult. We felt a lot of guilt for how we treated his parents, so we could not bear to take the baby’s life. However if we foster the Khitan baby till he grows up, and he seeks us out for revenge, then isn’t that like raising a tiger and sowing the seeds for disaster. In the end Brother Leader handed to that peasant family one hundred Liang of silver and asked them to raise the Khitan baby as their own, and not divulge to the baby any information about his heritage. That husband and wife did not have any children so they were overjoyed and accepted immediately. The couple also did not have any idea that this baby was of Khitan descent, because on the way to Mount Song we had changed the baby’s clothes to fit that of a Han baby. The people of Great Song held great enmity towards people of Liao that ran deep all the way to their bone marrow. So if they saw a baby wearing Khitan clothes then they would cause him harm...”

Qiao Feng hearing this had grasped about nine tenths of the intent, shakily asked “Reverend Zhiguang, that family... that family at the base of Mount Song... what... what... are their names?”

Zhiguang replied, “Bangzhu must have already figured it out. I don’t have any more reason to hide it. That person’s surname is Qiao, named Sanhuai.”

A stunned Qiao Feng yelled out, "No! No! Reverend please stop talking nonsense. Stop fabricating these stories to cause me harm. I am a definitely a Han so how can I be a Khitan savage? Sanhuai is... is... the person who is my biological father. Reverend stop talking nonsense..." Suddenly he jumped in front of Zhiguang, the left hand snatched the monk's chest.

Shan Zheng and the four Elders called out, "Don't!" and immediately rushed forward to rescue the monk. But Qiao Feng's lightness skills were great. He jumped and dodged to one side while still maintaining hold of the Reverend with his left hand.

The sons of Shan Zheng - Shan Zhongshan, Shan Shushan, Shan Jishan - all three at the same time charged at the back of Qiao Feng. Qiao Feng, using only his right hand, caught both Shan Shushan and Shan Zhongshan then threw them far away. He next grabbed Shan Jishan, threw him to the ground, and placed his foot keeping pressure on Jishan's throat.

Shan Family's Five Tigers' reputation and prestige were renown throughout the whole Shandong region. The five brothers had already been famous for a long time based on their own deeds, definitely not ones who rely on the fortune and fame of their parents. Even then, Qiao Feng easily dispatched the brothers like it was nothing. With his left hand holding Zhiguang, his right hand lashed out to grab, he threw the three Shan brothers around like pieces of straw, not one was able to put up any resistance. People who saw this were shocked. Their jaws dropped in disbelief.

Shan Zheng, Shan Boshan, and Shan Xiaoshan felt anxious seeing their own flesh and blood in danger, wanted to jump in to help. But Qiao Feng had a foot on Shan Jishan's throat. Knowing that his strength was something worth fearing, and all it needed was a press of the foot and Jishan will lose his life. Because of that, the three father and sons dared not to come any closer. Shan Zheng yelled out, "Qiao

Bangzhu, if there is any misunderstanding then let us discuss it, don't be heavy handed. Our Shan family does not have any enmity with you. Please spare my son." Even the famous Iron Faced Judge was powerless and had to beg Qiao Feng.

Elder Xu called out, "Qiao Bangzhu, Reverend Zhiguang is a person who everyone in Jianghu respects. You must not harm his life!"

Qiao Feng's hot blood had boiled, and he said in a loud voice, "Correct! The Shan family and I have no enmities with each other. I also had always respected Reverend Zhiguang. You people... if you people want to take away my Bangzhu position, then I will surrender it to you with both hands, but why do you have to create lies to slander me? I... what sins have I committed that would cause you people to accuse me as such?" The last few sentences his voice was choked by tears. People who heard were unable to restrain their feelings and started to sympathize with him.

The bones on Zhiguang's skeleton let out a creaking sound. Everyone knew that his life was teetering on a needle. Whether he live or die all were in the hands of Qiao Feng. It was so quiet that one could hear the sounds of the wind beating against the trees, the sound of the insects in the grass, and even the sounds of people breathing. No one dared to make a noise.

A short time passed before Zhao Qiansun suddenly started laughing, "So laughable! So laughable! Han people are not necessarily a cut above other peoples and aren't Khitan people also are not pigs or dogs? Obviously you are a Khitan so why pretend to be a Han? What is there to be ashamed of? You even denied your birth parents and heritage, and here you call yourself a real man."

Qiao Feng opened his eyes wide in anger, angrily asked, "Is senior actually calling me a Khitan?"

Zhao Qiansun replied, "How can I be sure? But in that battle outside Yanmen Guan Pass, that Khitan man we

fought, his appearance and face is exactly like yours. That time I was so frightened. I fell unconscious immediately from terror. That man's face I will never forget even in a hundred years. Also with my own eyes I saw Reverend Zhiguang carrying that Khitan baby back. I am a good for nothing corpse that came back to life, in this world outside of Xiaojuan (Granny Tan), I don't involve myself in the business of anybody, nor do I have any involvement in other matters. If you are or if you are not the Bangzhu of the Beggars' Clan, what does that trifling thing have to do with me? Why would I bring false charges against you? What advantage is there for me to make up a story about helping to kill your parents years ago? Qiao Bangzhu, my martial arts when compared to yours is very lacking. If I don't want to live anymore, wouldn't just killing myself be a better option?"

Qiao Feng slowly put Reverend Zhiguang down. He then flicked his foot and the large body of Shan Jishan flew out and fell to the ground with a thud. Shan Jishan stood up immediately. He was not in the slightest injured.

Qiao Feng looked at Zhiguang, seeing his face had a confident aura without the slightest hint of falseness, then asked, "So what happened afterwards?"

Reverend Zhiguang replied, "What happened afterwards, you should already know. At age seven you went to pick chestnuts in the forest, got chased by a wolf, and was rescued by a monk from Shaolin. The monk killed the wolf and treated your injuries. Then day after day the monk returned to teach you martial arts. Is this correct?"

Qiao Feng replied, "Correct. It seems the Reverend also knew of this matter." Years ago when Reverend Xuanku passed his martial arts to Qiao Feng, he had ordered him not to tell anyone about it. So in Jianghu everyone had always thought that Qiao Feng was the direct disciple of Wang Bangzhu of the Beggars' Clan. Who knew that he and Shaolin Temple had such an old and deep relationship.

Zhiguang said, "That monk from Shaolin was asked by Brother Leader to teach you martial arts and guide you since childhood to keep you from walking down the wrong path. Regarding this matter, Brother Leader, Wang Bangzhu, and I had many disputes. I wanted you to live the life of a common person, as farmer, and did not want you to learn martial arts to keep you away from being involved with the grudges and enmities of Jianghu. Brother Leader said that if we do that then we will be doing another wrong to your parents. So to make amends we must take care of you and develop you into a great hero."

Qiao Feng said, "All you... all you seniors, why do you feel you will be doing wrong to my parents? People of Han and people of Khitan have been fighting and harming each other for a long time. It is a common thing. There is nothing to be regretful about."

Zhiguang sighed and said, "The stone writing outside of Yanmen Guan Pass to this day still has not faded. Why don't you go and see it. Brother Leader had already made up his mind and Wang Bangzhu went along with it. There was no way I by myself can win the argument. Only when you were sixteen years old did Wang Bangzhu received you as his disciple. After that there were many chances to get along together. Your natural talent is outstanding and progressed furiously. There was no way an average person can keep up with you. Of course if Brother Leader and Wang Bangzhu were not behind the scenes helping out, you would not be where you are today."

Qiao Feng lowered his head to ponder. Thinking back on his life, he had faced numerous difficulties but each and every time his bad luck had turned into good. He had not faced much pain or hardships. He had met with many lucky opportunities in life. It came even without asking for it. For a long time he had thought that it was all due to his luck. But after listening to Reverend Zhiguang he realized he had a secret benefactor helping him all those years and he was

ignorant of it. In his head he was stunned and asked himself, "If what the Reverend said was true then I am a Khitan and not a Han? Wang Bangzhu is not my kind teacher but the culprit who killed my father, killed my mother. The senior who helped me out in secret, he did not do it with pure intentions but probably only wanted to make reprimands to relieve him of his guilty conscience. No! No! That can't be right! Khitan people are evil and ruthless dogs. They are the mortal enemies of our Han people. How can I be one of those savages?"

(End of editing work).

Translated by forgot password

Zhiguang continued: 'Chief Wang was very wary of you at first, but later, seeing you make fast progress in learning martial arts, behave generously and chivalrously, treat people with clemency, treat him with great respect and prudence, and act to his liking in every aspect, he gradually became really fond of you. Afterward, as you made more contributions and gained more prestige, from the people at the top to the people at the bottom of the Beggar Society, each and every one honored and submitted to you, even outsiders also knew that the upcoming Chief of the Beggar Society would be no one but you. However Chief Wang had still been undecided about you all along because you're a Khitan. He tested you with three difficult problems, you got them done one by one, but only after you'd achieved seven feats did he entrust the Dog Beating Stick to you. In the Taishan convention that year, after you defeated nine strong enemies of the Beggar Society in succession, he then all the more resolutely installed you as the Chief of the Beggar Society. As far as laona (老那 - old kasaya, a term a Buddhist monk calls himself with) know, for the past several hundred years, there has never been another Chief of the Beggar Society who had to go through so many hardships like you did.'

Qiao Feng lowered his head and said: 'I only thought that enshi (恩師 - kind master) Chief Wang intended to train me, making me undergo many hardships so that I'd be able to take on important missions, but it turns out... but it turns out...' Saying to here, in his heart he already almost believed that it was true.

Zhiguang said: 'I only know as far as here. After you had started to serve as the Chief of the Beggar Society, seeing rumors in jianghu all having it that you acted heroically and valued justice, benefited the common people, behaved without partiality, reorganized the Beggar Society and made it thrive, inwardly I felt happy for you. Also, hearing that you'd several times ruined vicious schemes of Khitan people and killed some of their notable figures, I thought that, in that way, our previous fear of nourishing a viper in our own bosoms had become almost as groundless as the fear of the Qi people (杞憂 - the fear [of the sky collapsing] of the Qi people - referring to groundless fears). This incident should never have been mentioned, but somehow someone uncovered it? This is unlikely to be any good to the Beggar Society or Chief Qiao yourself.' Saying to here, he let out a deep sigh. There was a sorrowful expression on his face.

Elder Xu said: 'Zhiguang dashi (大師 - great monk), thank you very much for relating past events making everyone feel as if they were personally on the scene. This letter...' He raised that letter with his hand and continued: 'was written by that leading hero to Chief Wang. In the letter he made every effort to dissuade Chief Wang from handing over the Chief of the Beggar Society position to Chief Qiao. Chief Qiao, you may as well have a look at it.' When he finished saying, he held out the letter.

Zhiguang said: 'Let me take a look first, to see if it's truly the original letter.' When he finished saying, he received and held the letter in his hands, read it one time and said: 'Correct, this is really the leading big brother's original handwriting.' Once finishing saying, he slightly transferred

power into his left-hand fingers to torn off the foot of the letter where there was the sender's name then put it in his mouth. With a bending of his tongue it was already swallowed into his stomach.

When Zhiguang torn the letter he had taken several steps towards the bonfire, thus he was a bit farther apart from Qiao Feng. Moreover, he was putting the letter paper close to his eyes as if there was insufficient light and he could not see clearly, therefore when he torn off and put the bottom part of the letter in his mouth, the letter paper were just several cun (寸 - Chinese inch ~ 3.33 cm) away from his lips. Qiao Feng could never have expected this old monk of noble character and high prestige to use this cunning trick. With a roar of anger, he struck out with his left palm hitting the monk's acupuncture points from a distance. His right hand immediately grabbed the letter, but it was still a bit too late, as the signature at the foot of the letter had already been swallowed by the monk down his throat. Qiao Feng struck out another palm to unblock his acupuncture points and angrily asked: 'You... What are you doing?'

Zhiguang smiled and said: 'Chief Qiao, once you have become aware of who you are, perhaps you will want to seek revenge for the murders of your parents. Chief Wang already passed away so there's no need to mention him. But laona don't want to let you know the name of this leading big brother. Laona also participated in the ambush against your father and mother that year, laona shall expiate all the crimes by myself, if you want to kill me or cut me to pieces, please do not hesitate to do so.'

Seeing Zhiguang lower his eyes and droop his eyebrows, looking merciful and stately, even though Qiao Feng was very sad and angry, he could not help having a feeling of respect for the monk. He then said: 'Whether this matter is true or fake, at the moment I still don't know. Even if I wanna kill you, there's no hurry to do so now.' When he finished saying, he gave Zhao Qiansun a sidelong look.

Zhao Qiansun shrugged his shoulders as if he was totally unconcerned about it and said: 'That's right, me included as well, you must give me my share of this debt. Just kill me whenever you like.'

Grandpa Tan loudly said: 'Chief Qiao, everything should be considered carefully. Don't act recklessly. If you incited the Hu Han conflict (Hu - 胡 - referring to minority people in northern and western China in feudal times), every person of exceptional ability in Central Plains would become your enemy.' Even though Zhao Qiansun was Grandpa Tan's love rival, at that time he still raised his voice in support of him.

Qiao Feng let out a cold laugh, feeling utterly confused and not knowing how to reply. He then had a look at the letter in the firelight, only seeing it read: 'My Elder Brother Jianran (剑然 - sword beard/whiskers - Wang Jiantong's nickname), after several nights of discussion, your idea of handing over your position has always been unchanged. However, after thinking about it carefully for several days, I still believe that it is inadvisable. Brother Qiao is a man of extraordinary talents. He has made many great contributions and behaved himself courageously and righteously. Not only is he the outstanding figure in the Beggar Society, but in the whole of wulin in the Divine Land (神州 - China's old name) there are only a very few people who can come close to him. If this talent inherits your position, it is only natural to expect that the prestige of the Beggar Society will expand at some time in the future.'

Reading up to here, Qiao Feng felt that this senior held himself in extremely high esteem, so in his heart he was very grateful to him for that. He continued reading:

'But there's not a day that I don't think about the bloody battle at Yanmen pass and the shocking situations at that time. This child doesn't belong to our ethnic group, his father and mother died because of both of us. In the future if he doesn't know about his origin then there'd be no problem. Otherwise, not only will the Beggar Society be

destroyed in his hands, wulin in Central Plains will also have to face a massive catastrophe. At the present time, the people whose wits and martial arts can rival those of that child are extremely rare. It's not an outsider's job to interfere in the Beggar Society's important internal affairs, but our friendship is far beyond what is usual, moreover, the involvement of this matter is too huge, please give it careful consideration.' The signature at the foot of it had already been torn off by Zhiguang.

After reading the letter, Qiao Feng stood in stunned silence. Seeing that, Elder Xu held out another letter paper and said: 'This is Chief Wang's personal letter, you should recognize his handwriting.'

Qiao Feng received it. He only saw the letter paper read:

'Instructions to Vice-Chief Ma of the Beggar Society, the Elder of Merit Propagation, the Elder of Rule Enforcement, and the other Elders: If Qiao Feng has any deed that is pro-Liao (辽 - a rival empire of Song) and anti-Han, and helps Khitan fight against Great Song (宋 - a Chinese dynasty), the whole Society must join forces to kill him, and make no mistake. Poisoning and assassination can both be applied. The killer will get credit for and not be guilty of doing so. Wang Jiantong personally penned.'

The date written at the end of the letter was: 'Great Song, the sixth Yuanfeng year, the seventh day of the fifth month.' Qiao Feng remembered clearly that it had been the day he had taken over the Chief of the Beggar Society position.

Qiao Feng knew without doubt that these several rows of words were really enshi Wang Jiantong's handwriting, thus, he was no longer uncertain about his origin. However, recalling that enshi had always acted like a kind father, being strict in teaching but also very affectionate, Qiao Feng found it hard to believe that he had secretly written and left behind this order on the day he (Qiao Feng) had taken over the Chief of the Beggar Society position. He felt

heartbroken. Tears streamed down his face, drop by drop falling on the instructions of Chief Wang.

Elder Xu slowly said: 'Chief Qiao, please don't blame us for being disrespectful. Originally only Vice-Chief Ma knew about these instructions of Chief Wang. He kept them very carefully and never told anyone about them. In the past several years you behaved straightforwardly, and didn't have any action that was pro-Liao and anti-Song and helped Khitan to oppress Han people, so Chief Wang's instructions were naturally of no use. It wasn't until the tragic death of Vice-Chief Ma that Madame Ma found out about this order. At first, everyone suspected that Vice-Chief Ma was killed by Murong gongzi (公子 - young nobleman) of Gusu, if you settled this score for brother Dayuan then there'd be no need to expose your origin. Laoxiu (老朽 - old senile - a term that old men call themselves modestly) thought about this again and again, because of the big picture I wanted to destroy the letter and Chief Wang's order, but... but...' Saying to here, he looked at Madame Ma, and said: 'Firstly, because Madame Ma earnestly wants to avenge her husband's death, it's impossible to just let the wrongs that brother Dayuan suffered remain unsolved or let him die with an eternal grievance. Secondly, Chief Qiao supported Hu people, a conduct that has really endangered our Society...'

Qiao Feng asked: 'I supported Hu people? Where did you get this from?'

Elder Xu said: 'The two words 'Murong' are a Hu surname. The Murong clan is the descendant of Xianbei people. Just like Khitan, they are an uncivilized ethnic group.' Qiao Feng said: 'Huh, so it was because of that, but I didn't know anything about it.' Elder Xu continued: 'Thirdly, a lot of people in the Society already know that you're a Khitan, it's no good concealing it.'

Qiao Feng looked into the sky and and let out a sigh. It was not until now that the depressing doubts and suspicions that had been in his mind for quite a while were cleared up.

He asked Quan Guanqing: 'Quan Guanqing, you knew that I'm a Khitan descendant so you opposed me, didn't you?' Quan Guanqing said: 'Yes.' Qiao Feng asked again: 'The Four Elders Song, Xi, Chen, Wu listened to you and tried to kill me also because of this reason?' Quan Guanqing said: 'Correct, but they only half believed me and couldn't make a decision. When the situation became critical they also chickened out.' Qiao Feng said: 'The clue about my origin, where did you get it from?' Quan Guanqing said: 'This matter involves outsiders, so excuse me for not being able to tell you. You should know that paper cannot wrap fire. No matter how you conceal your origin, someone would eventually find out about it. The Elder of Rule Enforcement has also already known about it for a long time.'

In a twinkling, thoughts in Qiao Feng's mind surged up like tidal waves, for a moment he thought: 'They've gotten jealous, making up all kinds of lies to frame me. Even if I, Qiao Feng, am all by myself, I won't surrender and will fight bravely to the death.' But immediately he also thought: 'Enshi's order is absolutely genuine. Zhiguang dashi is a person of high virtue and good reputation, and doesn't bear any resentment towards me, why should he set up this dirty plan? Elder Xu is an important senior figure of our Society, how can it be that he has the intention of overthrowing the Society? Impartial Judge Shan Zheng, Grandpa Tan, Granny Tan all are renowned seniors in wulin. This Zhao Qiansun guy is screwy but he's also not a zilch. How can this matter be false when they all tell the same thing?'

After listening to the words of the people like Zhiguang and Elder Xu, the mood of the beggar crowd was totally confused. Some people had already heard that he was a Khitan descendant, but they only half believed it, the other were only made aware of it at that moment. They found the evidences authentic, as it seemed even Qiao Feng himself believed so already. Qiao Feng had always been kind and fair to his subordinates, his abilities, virtue and martial arts

were admired by everyone, hence no one could have thought he was a Khitan descendant. But the enmity between Liao and Great Song was extremely deep and countless Beggar Society disciples had died at the hands of Liao people over the years, therefore letting a Khitan serve as the Chief of the Beggar Society was really out of the question. However, no one dared to speak out to demand his expulsion from the Society. For a short time, the apricot forest became quiet, only the sounds of everyone's heavy breaths could be heard.

Suddenly there was a clear voice of a woman: 'Uncles and brothers, my late husband unfortunately passed away. At the moment I can't say for sure who murdered him. Thinking that my late husband was always sincere and steady, and though he wasn't well-spoken he didn't have any enemy in jianghu, I really can't imagine why someone had to take his life. But they say that: 'Tardily hiding valuable things induces thieves' (□□□□ - a phrase in The Book of Changes), was it because my late husband had something important in his hands that until somebody else had they wouldn't be satisfied? Was that they murdered him as a witness because they feared he would let out the secret damaging important affairs?' It was Ma Dayuan's widow, Madame Ma, who said these words. The purpose of these several sentences was very clear, directly suggesting that the murderer of Ma Dayuan was Qiao Feng and the purpose of his deed was to cover up the evidences of him being a Khitan.

Qiao Feng slowly turned his head, looked directly at this timid-looking, dainty elegant woman who was wearing a full-length white mourning dress, and asked: 'You suspect that I murdered Vice-Chief Ma?'

All the time Madame Ma had been turning her back to Qiao Feng and looking down at the ground, at this moment she suddenly raised her head and looked at him. Seeing her eyes shining like gems and sparkling in the darkness, Qiao Feng was slightly afraid. He heard her say: 'I'm an ignorant

woman, showing my face in public is already unwise, how dare I randomly accuse someone else? But my late husband died with a grievance, uncles, I beg of you think about an old friendship, investigate and discover the truth to avenge my late husband.' As she finished saying she gracefully bent down and unexpectedly kowtowed to Qiao Feng.

She didn't state that Qiao Feng was the murderer, but every word she said pointed towards him. Seeing her kowtowing to him, even though Qiao Feng was angry, it was inappropriate for him to have an outburst, he had no alternative but to kneel down to return the salute, and said: 'Saozi (嫂孃 - a term to call a wife of one's older brother), please stand up.'

Suddenly, on the left-hand side of the apricot forest the voice of a girl could be heard: 'Madame Ma, there's a doubt in my mind, may I ask you a question?' Everyone turned in the direction of the voice and saw a young girl wearing a reddish gown. She was A'Zhu.

Madame Ma asked: 'What do you want to interrogate me about?' A'Zhu said: 'I dare not interrogate you. I heard you say that senior Ma had tightly sealed these letters with sealing wax, and when Elder Xu opened it, the painted imprint was still intact. Does that mean before Elder Xu opened the letters no one had seen their contents?' Madame Ma said: 'That's correct.' A'Zhu said: 'Then, besides senior Ma, originally nobody else knew about the letter of that Leading Big Brother and Chief Wang's order. So, words like tardily hiding valuable things induces thieves, murdered a witness just shouldn't have been said.'

Hearing these words of A'Zhu, everyone found them very reasonable.

Madame Ma said: 'Who are you? Why do you meddle in our Society's important affairs?' A'Zhu said: 'I'm just a little girl, how dare I meddle in your Society's important affairs? But since you all want to frame my Young Master, I can't help but to discern based on reasons.' Madame Ma asked

again: 'Who is your young master? Is he Chief Qiao?' A'Zhu shook her head, smiled and said: 'No. He is Murong gongzi.'

Madame Ma said: 'Huh, I see.' She stopped paying attention to A'Zhu, turned towards the Elder of Rule Enforcement and said: 'Elder Bai, the rules of our Society are as firm as a rock, if you violate them, how shall you be punished?' The muscles on the face of the Elder of Rule Enforcement Bai Shijing slightly twitched, he said solemnly: 'Deliberately breaking the rules, the seriousness of illegal deeds shall be increased by one level.' Madame Ma said: 'Then how about a person who has a higher rank than even you?' Bai Shijing knew who she was pointing towards so he could not help casting a glance at Qiao Feng and said: 'The rules of our Society were created by our ancestors. Everyone must comply with them irrespective of rank or position. The same contributions will be rewarded the same, the same offenses will be punished the same.'

Madame Ma said: 'The young lady is quite right to be suspicious of this. At first I thought so too. But in the evening of the immediate day before I received the sad news about my late husband's death, someone suddenly sneaked in our house to steal.'

Everyone was surprised. Someone asked: 'Steal? What was stolen? Did anyone get injured?'

Madame Ma said: 'No one was harmed. The thief used three sedative-imbued incense sticks to make me and two maids faint and fall to the floor. He then rummaged through everything in my house and stole around ten taels of silver. The next day I received the sad news that my late husband had unluckily been murdered, how could I have the mind to care about the matter of a thief stealing silver? Fortunately, my husband kept these letters in a very secret place so it wasn't stolen and destroyed by that thief.'

These several sentences were even clearer, obviously indicating that Qiao Feng either himself went to or sent a person to Ma Dayuan's house to steal these letters. Since he

When Qiao Feng heard that poem he was really shocked. As he focused his eyes on the fan, he saw a picture named 'The Hero Comes out of the Frontier Fortress to Fight the Enemy' drawn on the other side of it. This fan really belonged to him. That poem had been written on it by enshi Wang Jiantong and that picture had been drawn on it by Elder Xu. Even though the penmanship was not very refined, it had an air of heroism and righteousness, and when combined with the north wind and heavy snow depicted in the picture, it looked even more heroic and intense. This fan had been given to him on his twenty-fifth birthday as a present by enshi. He had always treasured it and kept it carefully, how come it had been lost at Ma Dayuan's house? Moreover, as he had a liberal character he never brought such things as folding fan with him.

Elder Xu turned the fan over, looked carefully at the picture which had been drawn with his own hands, let out a deep sigh, and mumbled: 'Not belonging to our ethnic group, his heart must be different. Chief Wang, ah, Chief Wang, you made a big big mistake about this matter.'

When Qiao Feng suddenly learned about his origin unexpectedly being a Khitan descendant, all sorts of feelings welled up in his hearts. For the past ten years he had tried his best everyday to devise plans to defeat Liao and kill more Khitan aggressors, therefore when all of a sudden he was confronted with this shocking matter, even though he had weathered many great storms, he could not help feeling at a loss. But after Madame Ma had again and again accused him of plotting the murder of Ma Dayuan and his folding fan had also appeared, he calmed down. In an instant several thoughts ran through his mind: 'Someone stole my folding fan to shift the blame onto me. This kind of trick can't cause Qiao Feng difficulties.' He turned to Elder Xu and said: 'Elder Xu, this folding fan is mine.'

When the people who had relatively high ranks or important positions in the Beggar Society heard Elder Xu

reading aloud those verses they immediately knew that it was Qiao Feng's, but the rest of the Society did not know about that. When they heard the confirmation from Qiao Feng himself, they were all stunned.

Elder Xu also became very emotional, he mumbled: 'On the whole, Chief Wang considered me a trusted subordinate, yet this important matter of leaving behind an order, he didn't let me know about it.'

Madame Ma stood up and said: 'Elder Xu, it was good for you that Chief Wang didn't tell you.' Elder Xu did not understand, he asked: 'What?' Madame Ma mournfully said: 'In the Beggar Society, only Dayuan knew about this matter, he then suffered a grievous death, you... you... had you known about the matter before, you may not have escaped this disaster.'

Qiao Feng said loudly and clearly: 'Does anyone have something else to say?' His eyes looked at Madame Ma then turned to Elder Xu, to Bai Shijing, to the Elder of Merit Propagation, then to everyone. No one said anything.

Qiao Feng waited for a moment, seeing that no one said anything, he said: 'My origin, I'm really ashamed that I myself can't confirm it. But because so many seniors have affirmed it, I must do my best to find out the truth about it. This Chief of the Beggar Society position, I'm leaving it to a worthy person.' Saying to here, he reached into a long bag on his right foot and took out a glossy dark-green bamboo stick, which was the Dog Beating Stick, the symbol of the Chief of the Beggar Society, and said: 'This stick was given to me by Chief Wang. When I was in charge of the Beggar Society, even though I didn't have any contribution, luckily I didn't commit any serious offense either. Today I give up my position, if any heroic worthy person wants to take on this post, please come to receive this stick.'

According to the rules of the Beggar Society that had been passed down from generation to generation, when a new Chief assumed their post, the post had to be handed

over by the former Chief using the Dog Beating Stick, and before the stick was handed over, the Dog Beating Stick technique had to be passed on. Hence, even if the former Chief suddenly passed away, the successor had already been confirmed and the Dog Beating Stick technique had also already been passed on. Therefore there had never been any dispute over the Chief position. Qiao Feng was in the prime of his life, he had estimated that, in every case, twenty years later he would select a heroic worthy person in the Society to pass on the Dog Beating Stick technique. At this moment, seeing him holding the bamboo stick in his hand and standing fearlessly in front of everybody, who in the beggar crowd dared to come out and receive the stick?

Qiao Feng successively asked three times, but no one in the Beggar Society said anything. He said: 'Qiao Feng's origin is unclear, so, no matter what, I dare not be in charge of this Chief position anymore. Elder Xu and the two Elders of Merit Propagation and Rule Enforcement, this Society-stabilizing treasure, the Dog Beating Stick, you three please take care of it together. Later, once you've decided on another Chief, it won't be late for the three of you to hand it over.'

Elder Xu said: 'It's sensible to say so. As for the Dog Beating Stick technique, we're gonna discuss it in the future.' He went forward to receive the bamboo stick.

Suddenly Elder Song loudly said: 'Wait!' Elder Xu stopped in surprise and asked: 'Brother Song, what do you wanna say?' Elder Song said: 'As far as I can tell Chief Qiao isn't a Khitan.' Elder Xu said: 'How do you do that?' Elder Song said: 'I find him different than a Khitan.' Elder Xu said: 'How different?' Elder Song said: 'Khitan people are very vicious, ruthless, and cruel. But Chief Qiao is a righteous noble hero. Only a moment ago we opposed him, but he still willingly suffered stabs and shed blood for us, and pardoned us for the serious offense of revolt. How can a Khitan be like this?'

Elder Xu said: 'From his childhood he was taught by eminent Shaolin monks and Chief Wang, so his ferocious Khitan character has already changed.'

Elder Song said: 'As his character has changed, he's no longer an evil man, what's improper with him being our Chief? I see that in our Society there's no one else as heroic as him. If anybody else wants to be the Chief, I'm afraid I myself won't be content.'

Many people in the Beggar Society had the same thought as Elder Song's. Qiao Feng's kindness had always been in the mind of everyone, merely based on verbal statements and written evidences of some people to remove him from the Chief position certainly made many people who were loyal to him feel discontent. After Elder Song had taken the lead in speaking his mind, several tens of people in the beggar crowd also shouted out: 'Someone's plotting to frame Chief Qiao. We can't recklessly believe their words.' 'Things that happened tens of years ago, just based on the bull of some of you, who can find out if they're true or fake?' 'The Chief position can't be changed so rashly like this!' 'I wholeheartedly follow Chief Qiao! If they forcefully change the Chief post, even if my head is cut off I'll still be discontent.'

Elder Xi loudly said: 'Those who are willing to follow Chief Qiao go with me to this side.' He pulled Elder Song with his left hand, pulled Elder Wu with his right hand, and walked to the east. After that the three heads of the Great Kindness branch, the Great Faith branch and the Great Righteousness branch also walked to the east. After the heads of these three branches had gone to the east, their subordinates one by one went after them. Quan Guanqing, Elder Chen, the Elder of Merit Propagation, and the heads of the Great Wisdom branch and the Great Courage branch however stood still. Therefore, in a moment, the Beggar Society's members were divided into two groups, the one in the east consisted of five tenths and the one who stood still consisted

of three tenths. The rest of the Society's members were hesitant, not knowing which group they should follow. The Elder of Rule Enforcement Bai Shijing had always been resolute and decisive in his actions and stood by his word, but at this moment he felt very awkward and hesitant too.

Quan Guanqing said: 'Brothers, Chief Qiao is outstandingly capable and heroic, who doesn't admire him? But being the common people of Great Song, how can we listen to and obey the orders of a Khitan? The greater Qiao Feng's abilities are, the more dangerous he is to everyone.'

Elder Xi shouted: 'Bullsh!t! Bullsh!t! Fvck you! As far as I can see, you look almost like a Khitan.'

Quan Guanqing loudly said: 'Everyone here is a good Han who dedicates himself to the service of the motherland, how could we willingly serve as slaves and lackeys of another ethnicity?' These few sentences of his were really effective, in the group of beggars who had walked to the east, there were more than ten people returning to the west. The beggars in the east then swore and pulled, creating a confusing situation. In an instant, several tens of people engaged in a melee, some using unarmed martial arts and some using weapons. The Elders said loudly to hold back the situation, but each of them had his own bias. Elder Wu and Elder Chen even fiercely pointed at and swore at each other like they would start a fight any moment.

Qiao Feng shouted: 'Brothers, please stop fighting and hear me.' His voice was imposing, the wrangle in the beggar crowd immediately stopped. All turned their heads and looked at him.

Qiao Feng said in a loud and clear voice: 'This Chief of the Beggar Society post, I definitely can no longer hold it...' Elder Song interrupted: 'Chief, you mustn't lose heart...' Qiao Feng shook his head and said: 'It's not that I've lost heart. If the evidence was something else then there might be a plot to frame me, but this is my enshi Chief Wang's handwriting, other people can't fake it in any case.' He

raised his voice, saying: 'The Beggar Society is the greatest society in jianghu and has an illustrious prestige, who in wulin doesn't revere it? If we kill each other, wouldn't that make outsiders laugh their heads off? Before I go I have one thing to tell you, that is, whoever lands another punch or kick on our Society's brothers will become an offender of the highest level of our Society.'

The Beggar Society had always had a high opinion of courage and righteousness, hence hearing him say so everyone secretly felt ashamed.

Suddenly the voice of a woman was heard: 'Then what if someone kills our Society's brothers?' The person who said that was Madame Ma. Qiao Feng said: 'An eye for an eye. For harming or murdering his brothers, he'll be detested by the whole world.' Madame Ma said: 'That's right.'

Qiao Feng said: 'Who murdered Vice-Chief Ma? Who stole this folding fan of mine to frame me? Eventually, everything will be able to be cleared up by investigation. Madame Ma, with my abilities, if I wanna go to your house to get something I wouldn't return empty-handed, it'd be even more improbable for me to lose something I bring with me. Needless to say, there were only two or three women in your house. Even if it was the imperial palace, the mansion of a general, or a place guarded by a strong army with thousands of horses, if I wanted to take something I wouldn't necessarily be unable to get it done.'

These few sentences sounded very imposing. The beggar crowd had always known about his abilities therefore they all found his words reasonable. No one thought that he had just talked big. Madame Ma lowered her head and said nothing.

Qiao Feng cupped his hand around his fist in salute to everyone all around and said: 'The verdant hills will never change, the green waters will flow forever, farewell, my good brothers. It's alright if I'm a Han, it's also alright if I'm a Khitan, from now on I won't ever endanger the life of any

Han. If I break this vow I shall be like this saber.' As he finished saying, he leaped towards Shan Zheng and made a grab at the same time.

Shan Zheng only felt a jerk at his wrist, the saber in his hand could no longer be held firmly. His fingers loosened, the saber had already been snatched by Qiao Feng. Qiao Feng bent his right middle finger with his right thumb and gave the back of the saber a finger flick, a clang was heard, the saber had been broken into two pieces, the top of it had been sent flying away for several chi (一丈 ~ 33.33 cm), the handle was still being held in his hand. He turned towards Shan Zheng, said: 'Excuse me!', then threw the handle on the ground and walked away proudly.

Everyone was astounded, someone shouted after him: 'Chief, don't go!' 'The Beggar Society totally relies on your direction!' 'Chief, please return quickly!'

All of a sudden a whizzing sound could be heard. A bamboo stick went down from midair. It was none other than Qiao Feng who had thrown the Dog Beating Stick backwards.

Elder Xu held out his hand to receive it. As soon as his right hand got hold of the bamboo stick he experienced a shaking which spread from his palm up to his arm, from his arm through his whole body, and made him felt as if he is being hit by a thunderbolt. He quickly let go of it. As the leftover force of the throw in the stick was still strong, it passed straight into the ground.

The beggar crowd exclaimed in unison. Looking at this very important 'seeing the stick is like seeing the Chief' symbol of their Society, all kinds of thoughts ran through their minds.

The sun had risen. Through spaces between branches and leaves of apricot trees, rays of golden light came down and illuminated the 'Dog Beating Stick', making it shine like glossy jade.

Duan Yu called out: 'Big Brother, Big Brother, I'll go with you!' He set out to chase after Qiao Feng but after just three steps, feeling unable to leave Wang Yuyan at this moment, he turned his head and cast a look at her. This one look made him feel even more unable to pull away. Thousands of soft silk threads seemed to have appeared in his heart pulling him back. He turned around, went to and stood before Wang Yuyan, then said: 'Miss Wang, where are the three of you going now?'

Wang Yuyan said: 'Biaoge (舅舅 - maternal aunt's, paternal aunt's or maternal uncle's son) has been given a false accusation, perhaps he himself hasn't known about it, I need to inform him.'

Duan Yu felt his heart ache with sadness, he said: 'Hum, you are young ladies, there'll be inconveniences to you on the way, please allow me to escort the three of you?' He also added another sentence, trying to explain himself away: 'Having heard a lot about Murong gongzi's illustrious reputation, I also want to meet him once.'

Elder Xu said loudly and clearly: 'How to avenge Vice-Chief Ma, we should consider the matter carefully. But our Society cannot be without a leader for even one day, Chief... Qiao Feng has already left, deciding who will take over this Chief of the Society post is an urgent important matter that cannot be delayed. Quite incidentally, everyone is here, so we must carry out negotiations immediately.'

Elder Song said: 'In my opinion, everyone should go find Chief Qiao back, ask him to change his views and not to quit his post...' When he had not finished saying, someone in the west shouted: 'Qiao Feng is a Khitan barbarian, how can he be our Chief? Today everyone still thought of the old friendship, but the next time we meet he'll be our enemy, it won't be possible not to go all-out to the death.' Elder Wu sneered: 'You'll fight Chief Qiao all-out to the death? Do you deserve?' That man said furiously: 'I certainly can't fight him by myself; but how about ten people? If ten people won't do;

how about one hundred people? Righteous men of the Beggar Society are loyal and devote themselves to the country, don't tell me that we would shy away from the enemies?' These few sentences of his were full of strong feelings and emotions. Many people in the beggar group in the west applauded.

When the applause had not ended, suddenly in the northwest there was a sinister sorrowful voice of a man: 'The Beggar Society had agreed to meet us at Huishan then broke the promise and didn't show up, it turns out all of you have been sneakily hiding here, ha ha ha, this is so laughable.' This voice was piercing, the words were pronounced incorrectly as if his mouth was full of tongue and his nose was stuffy, therefore it was very uncomfortable to hear.

Captain Jiang of the Great Righteousness branch and Captain Fang of the Great Courage branch cried out at the same time: 'A'yo', and said: 'Elder Xu, we missed the meeting, the enemies have gotten here to find us!'

Duan Yu also remembered that on the day when he had first met Qiao Feng at a restaurant he had heard someone reporting to Qiao Feng that they had arranged to meet people of Western Xia's 'First-class Hall' in the morning of the following day. At that time Qiao Feng had felt that it would be too pressing, but he had still said yes to the arrangement. It was already past seven a.m., most of the people in the Beggar Society did not know about this meeting. Even the people who had known about it only focused their minds on important internal affairs of their Society and ignored it. At the moment, hearing their enemies' mocking words, they suddenly woke up.

Elder Xu continuously asked: 'What meeting is this? Who are the enemies?' He had not been taking part in any affair in Jianghu or of the Beggar Society for a long time therefore he knew absolutely nothing. The Elder of Rule Enforcement asked Captain Jiang in a low voice: 'Was it Chief Qiao who

agreed to meet them?' Captain Jiang said: 'Yes, but I already followed Chief Qiao's order, sending one man to Huishan to ask the enemies to postpone the meeting until seven days later.'

The owner of that sinister sorrowful voice had a really keen sense of hearing, Captain Jiang said these two sentences in a low voice yet he actually heard them, he said: 'This meeting was already decided, how can it possibly be put back to seven or eight days later? Even one hour later is still impossible.'

Bai Shijing said furiously: 'The Beggar Society is a grand society of Great Song, how could we fear you Western Xia barbarians? We haven't dealt with you despicable scoundrels properly only because we're having important affairs. It's usual to change a date, what do you moan about?'

Suddenly a whizzing sound was heard. A man flew out of the apricot forest, fell stiffly on the ground and did not make a move. His face had been crushed and was covered with blood. His throat had been slit. He had already been dead for a long time. People in the Beggar Society identified him as Vice-Captain Xie of the Great Righteousness branch.

Captain Jiang was both shocked and angry, he said: 'Brother Xie was sent by me to change the date.'

The Elder of Rule Enforcement said: 'Elder Xu, Chief isn't here, please temporarily act as Chief.' He did not want to let out the truth that the Beggar Society was leaderless to avoid showing the impression of weakness to the enemies. Elder Xu understood, he thought that at this moment if he himself did not run the show then no one would, he then said loudly and clearly: 'They say two countries which fight each other don't kill messengers. Why did you kill the messenger that our humble Society sent to change the date of the meeting?'

That sinister sorrowful voice replied: 'This man looked arrogant, expressed himself insolently, and did not kowtow when he saw our General. How could I let him live?' When

the people of the Beggar Society heard that, they immediately boiled over with anger, many people shouted out swear words.

Until now Elder Xu still did not know who the enemies were, he heard Bai Shijing call them 'Western Xia barbarians', but that man had also mentioned something like 'our General', this really made him find it difficult to get a clue. He said: 'Why don't you show your face instead of hiding sneakily? Why just talk nonsense and brag foolishly?'

That man cackled and said: 'Who are hiding sneakily in the apricot forest?'

Suddenly there were boo-hoo sounds of bugles coming from afar, after that hoofbeats of a troop of horses coming from several li (里 - 0.5 km) away could be vaguely heard.

Elder Xu put his mouth close to Bai Shijing's ear and asked quietly: 'Who are they? What's the matter?' Bai Shijing also replied quietly: 'Western Xia has a martial arts hall called 'First-class Hall' which was set up by the king of that country to recruit people who excel in martial arts and uses special treatments and gifts to tempt them to teach martial arts to Western Xia's officers and troops.'

Elder Xu nodded and said: 'Hasn't Western Xia been strengthening its army and practising martial arts because it's planned to seize our Great Song's territories?' Bai Shijing quietly said: 'Absolutely. The people who have entered 'First-class Hall' all are known for their first-class martial arts. The boss of First-class Hall is a wangye (王爺 - a very high rank of nobility usually held by a king's/an emperor's/an empress' brothers or uncles). He was appointed as the East Conquering General. His name is He Lian Tie Shu or something like that. According to what brother Yi Dabiao, sent to Western Xia by our Society, has reported, recently He Lian Tie Shu has led the warriors of the Hall to Bianliang (the capital of Song) to have an audience with the Empress Dowager and the Emperor of our Great Song. In fact, having an audience was just a sham. Their true motive was to spy

upon our country's actual conditions. Knowing that our Society is one of the great pillars of Great Song's wulin they wanna destroy our Society, firstly, in order to build their prestige. Later, if they again lead their army to violate the boundary of our country, it'd be easy to push deep into our land.' Elder Xu was secretly frightened, he whispered: 'This scheme is really cruel and dangerous.'

Bai Shijing said: 'After this He Lian Tie Shu guy left Bianliang, he went to our nerve center in Luoyang. Incidentally, at that time Chief Qiao had led us to Jiangnan to avenge Vice-Chief Ma so the Western Xia people only attacked an empty place. But they didn't give up and chased after us to Jiangnan. Eventually they and Chief Qiao decided to have a meeting.'

Elder Xu thought deeply and whispered: 'So according to what they have planned, they'll destroy our Beggar Society first, maybe they'll attack Shaolin Monastery next, then crush the big martial arts schools and societies of Central Plains.' Bai Shijing said: 'That's the plan. But can these Western Xia warriors carry it out so easily? What do they have to be this arrogant? Chief Qiao somewhat knows about the truth, but too bad at this urgent moment he...' Saying to here, feeling inappropriate, he suddenly stopped.

At this moment, the horse hoofbeats had drawn near, all of a sudden three bugle sounds were heard, eight horses split into two rows and burst into the forest. Each of the people riding on the horses was holding a lance. A small flag was tied to the head of each lance. The heads of the lances glinted. It could vaguely be noticed that the four small flags on the left-hand side all were embroidered with two white words 'Western Xia' and the four on the right-hand side were embroidered with two white words 'He Lian', the flags also had other Western Xia characters embroidered on them. After that, there were eight other horses which split into two rows and ran quickly into the forest. Four of the people

riding on these horses were blowing bugles and the other four were beating drums.

Everyone in the beggar crowd scowled: 'This disposition of troops is totally like a march in a war. Where is the meeting between brave men in jianghu?'

There were eight Western Xia warriors arriving after the buglers and drummers. Seeing the expressions on their faces Elder Xu knew obviously that they all have top-class martial arts, he thought: 'It seems these are people of First-class Hall.' Those eight warriors split up and stood on both sides. Then a horse slowly walked into the forest. The man on the horse was wearing a scarlet brocade robe. He was around thirty four or thirty five years old, had an aquiline nose and a splay moustache. Following him closely was a very tall man who shouted as soon as he entered the forest: 'East Conquering General of Western Xia has arrived; the Chief of the Beggar Society goes forward to pay respects.' This voice which sounded very unusual belonged to no one other than the man who had talked to the beggar crowd a moment ago.

Elder Xu said: 'The Chief of our Society is not here. Laoxiu will take care of the Society's affairs on his behalf. The Beggar Society's brothers are all normal people in jianghu. If you, as a General of Western Xia, use guest ceremony for meeting, then we won't dare to make friends with a man of such a high position. Please go have audiences with the princes, dukes or officers of our Great Song; you don't need to meet us beggars who have to beg for food. But if you use the status of a man in wulin for meeting us, then as you are a guest coming from afar, please get off your horse and behave according to common courtesies for guests and hosts.' These several sentences showed neither inferiority nor superiority. They did not offend the opponents, but also took into consideration the status of the Beggar Society. The beggar crowd thought: 'Sure enough, the older ginger is hotter, Elder Xu is awesome.'

The big-nosed man said: 'If the Chief of your Society is not here our General can't treat you with courtesies.' He cast a glance and saw the Dog Beating Stick driven into the ground. Knowing that it was an important object of the Beggar Society, he said: 'Huh, taking this glossy dark green bamboo stick to make a broom handle is not bad.' He made a swing with his arm, the horsewhip in his hand shot out to wind around the Dog Beating Stick.

The beggars shouted in unison: 'Fvck off!'; 'Fvck you!'; 'You Tartar dog!' When the tip of his horsewhip was about to wind around the Dog Beating Stick, suddenly there was a silhouette moving very quickly, a person leapt out at an oblique angle and stood in front of the Dog Beating Stick. He extended his arm, let the horsewhip wind around it then bent it. The big-nosed man could no longer sit steadily on the saddle and had to jump off his horse to stand on the ground. Both of them exerted their strength at the same time. A snap was heard, the horsewhip was broken into two pieces. That person moved his hand backwards and grabbed the Dog Beating Stick. Without saying a word he returned to where he had come from.

Everyone looked at him and saw a withered old man with a bent back. He was no one other than the Elder of Merit Propagation. His martial arts were very good. He usually did not like to talk much, but when the important symbol of the Society had been in danger he had protected it bravely. A moment ago, in just one move, the big-nosed man had already been dismounted and his horsewhip had also been broken. It could be said that the big-nosed man had lost.

Even though this big-nosed man had just suffered a small defeat, he did not bat an eyelid and said: 'You beggars really are too stingy, hating to give away even a bamboo stick.'

Elder Xu said: 'Brave men of Western Xia, why did you and our poor Society decide to meet?'

That man said: 'Our General has heard that the Beggar Society of Central Plains has two great techniques, one

being the Cat Beating Stick, the other being the Snake Subduing Eighteen Palms, so he wanna widen his knowledge a bit.'

As soon as the beggars heard that, they all flew into a rage. This man deliberately called the Dog Beating Stick technique the Cat Beating Stick technique and called the Dragon Subduing Eighteen Palms technique the Snake Subduing Eighteen Palms technique, his intention of insulting was extremely obvious. It seemed in the meeting today a fierce battle of life or death was already unavoidable.

While the beggar crowd was cursing, the people such as Elder Xu, the Elder of Merit Propagation, and the Elder of Rule Enforcement secretly felt anxious: 'All along, only the Chief of our Society is able to use the Dog Beating Stick technique and the Dragon Subduing Eighteen Palms. The enemies already knew about the reputation of these two great techniques yet they still brashly come to challenge, perhaps they're not easy to deal with.' Elder Xu said: 'You want to see our Society's Cat Beating Stick technique and Snake Subduing Eighteen Palms to widen your knowledge, there's not the slightest problem. As long as there are cowardly cats and snakes with scabies showing up here, we beggars will have our way of dealing with them. You mimic cats or mimic snakes?' Elder Wu ha-ha laughed and said: 'If the opponents are dragons, we will subdue dragons, if they're snake, then we beggars can't be better at catching snakes.'

The big-nosed man was again defeated in arguing. While he was thinking about what to say, there was a deep gruff voice from behind him: 'Cat Beating is also fine, Snake Subduing is also fine, come, come, come, who's gonna have a fight with me first?' As that man finished saying he walked out from the crowd and stood with his arms akimbo.

The beggars could see that this man looked ugly and ferocious. All of a sudden Duan Yu loudly said: 'Hey, my

disciple, you came here as well? Why haven't you kowtowed after seeing master?' The ferocious-looking man turned out to be none other than South Sea Divine Alligator Yue Laosan (T/Note: this is prolly not Yue's real name, it literally means Yue, the third man).

He was astonished when he saw Duan Yu and immediately looked very awkward. He said: 'You... You...' Duan Yu said: 'Good disciple, the Beggar Society's Chief is my sworn big brother so these people are your apprentice uncles, you mustn't disrespect them. Go home quickly!' South Sea Divine Alligator let out a roar making the leaves of the apricot trees around rustle and cursed: 'Turtle egg! Bastard!' (T/Note: turtle egg - 王八蛋 - basically an equivalent of 'son of a b!tch')

Duan Yu said: 'Who did you curse as turtle egg and bastard?' South Sea Divine Alligator was extremely vicious, however when he himself said something he never broke his words. He had already recognized Duan Yu as his master, but he did not deny that and said: 'I like cursing. How can you control me? I didn't curse you.' Duan Yu said: 'Hum, you already saw master, why haven't you kowtowed to pay respects to me?' South Sea Divine Alligator repressed his anger, went forwards, kowtowed and said: 'Master, are you all right?' The more he thought about this the angrier he got. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and ran away while howling furiously.

Everyone found that howl sounded like retreating tidewater, burst after burst rushing away yet big waves still surging up fiercely. Just hearing this howl they knew that this man's martial arts were not something to disregard. Probably in the Beggar Society only several people like Elder Xu and the Elder of Merit Propagation could rival him. It was extremely strange that Duan Yu, a gentle and weak student, was unexpectedly his master. Wang Yuyan, A'Zhu and A'Bi knew that Duan Yu did not know martial arts so they were much more surprised.

Suddenly a man leaped out from the group of the Western Xia warriors. Despite being tall like a bamboo pole, his movements were exceptionally fast. Each of his hands was holding a strange weapon whose handle was about three chi (T/Note: one chi ~ 33.33 cm) long and one head was a steel claw with five fingers. Duan Yu recognized him as the fourth member of 'The Four Evils under Heaven' 'Extreme Ferocity Utmost Evil' Yun Zhonghe, he thought: 'Could it be that these four evildoers have all joined Western Xia?' He looked carefully at the Western Xia people and saw 'Not to Stop at Any Crime' Ye Erniang standing there embracing a child and smiling. But he did not see the leader 'Be Guilty of the Worst Crimes' Duan Yanqing. Duan Yu thought: 'As long as Prince Yanqing is not here the Beggar Society can handle the second evil and the fourth evil.'

It turned out after being defeated in Dali 'The Four Evils under Heaven' had fled northwards and run into envoys of Western Xia's First-class Hall who had been out to recruit high-level martial arts users. Unwilling to be by themselves, they had all offered their service immediately. These four people had so excellent martial arts that after showing their skills a little they had been recruited right away. This time going eastwards to Bianliang, He Lian Tie Shu brought all of them with him and regarded them quite highly. Thinking that he himself had a high status, even though Duan Yanqing was dependent on First-class Hall he acted freely. He did not accept any restrictive order and go with the others.

Yun Zhonghe shouted: 'Our General wants to see the Beggar Society's two great techniques. In the end you beggars have true skills or are just boasting? Quickly come here to fight for real!'

Elder Xi said: 'I'm fighting him.' Elder Xu said: 'Okay! This man's lightness skill is very unusual, brother Xi must be careful.' Elder Xi said: 'Yes!' Carrying his steel pole he walked towards Yun Zhonghe, stood facing him from a distance of more than one zhang (T/Note: one zhang ~

3.333 m), and said: 'The use of our Society's great techniques is dependent on who the opponent is. Why should the Dog Beating Stick technique be used to handle a shrimp like you? Watch out!' He raised the steel pole, creating a whirring sound, and swung it down at Yun Zhonghe's left shoulder at an angle. Elder Xi was stubby but the steel pole in his hands were longer than one zhang, once it was brandished, even if the opponent was very tall like Yun Zhonghe, it was still possible for him to strike down from the air. Yun Zhonghe leaned sideways and dodged. A bang was heard, dirt flew on all sides, the steel pole had hit the ground and its head had gone one chi into the ground. Yun Zhonghe knew that his true abilities were far inferior to Elder Xi's so he applied a hit-and-run tactic using his lightness skill, for a moment he had been in the east, the next moment he already flashed to the west. Elder Xi's steel pole had been brandished into a white sphere but all the while it had not been able to touch Yun Zhonghe's clothes.

While Duan Yu was being absorbed in the fight, suddenly he heard a lovely gentle voice next to him: 'Mr. Duan, who should we help?' Duan Yu leaned his head to one side and saw that it was Wang Yuyan. He could not help feeling elated and hurriedly asked: 'What... who should what help?' Wang Yuyan said: 'This lanky man is your disciple's friend while this stubby beggar is your sworn brother's subordinate. The more these two have been fighting the fiercer they've become, who we should help?' Duan Yu said: 'My disciple is a villain and this lanky guy's character is even worse, don't help him.'

Wang Yuyan muttered: 'Hum, but the whole Beggar Society have driven your sworn brother away and don't let him be the Chief. They've also falsely accused my biaoage, I hate them.' In the heart of a young girl like her, whoever treated her biaoage badly was the worst person under heaven. She continued: 'This stubby geezer is using the twenty four Demon Taming Pole stances of Mt. Wutai, but

because he's too short the two stances 'The King of Qin Whips Rock' and 'The Roc Spreads the Wings' can't be executed well. If the right-hand side of his lower body is attacked he won't be able to defend himself. But this lanky man doesn't realize that, he thinks the lower body of short people must be stable but in fact that's not true.'

Even though her voice was very low, all the high-level martial arts users with fine internal energy at the scene had already heard what she said. The majority of these people knew about Elder Xi's martial arts and skills but they might not necessarily realize where his stances were flawed. Once Wang Yuyan pointed out, they immediately felt that she was correct because whenever Elder Xi had used the two stances 'The King of Qin Whips Rock' and 'A Roc Spreads the Wings', his power had really been excessive but his stability had been deficient, his lower body had been rather vulnerable.

Yun Zhonghe cast a sidelong glance at Wang Yuyan and praised: 'You little girl are very beautiful. It's rarer that you have such great insight. Following me and becoming my wife are even more okay.' While saying he used the steel claws in his hands to attack Elder Xi's lower body with three swift stances. Elder Xi was too late to ward off the third stance. A sound of tearing was heard, his thigh had just suffered a long cut by Yun Zhonghe's steel claws and immediately dripped blood.

Hearing Yun Zhonghe praise herself for being beautiful Wang Yuyan was quite happy, therefore she did not think his flirty and frivolous words were offensive. She smiled and said: 'How shameless. What's good about you? I'm not marrying you.' Yun Zhonghe was very pleased, he said: 'Why not? You're already in love with that pretty boy, right? I'll kill your love interest first, to see if you'll marry me?' These sentences had seriously violated Wang Yuyan's taboos. She frowned and no longer paid attention to him.

Yun Zhonghe still wanted to say a few more words to gain advantage but Elder Wu of the Beggar Society leaped out,

lifted his demon-headed saber and slashed four times on the left hand side, four times on the right hand side, four times high, four times low, totaling sixteen slashes. The momentum of the saber was extremely fierce. Yun Zhonghe was not familiar with the stances of his saber technique therefore he could only dodge around, jerk his head back and jump up. For the moment he was totally perplexed.

Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'This Four Forms Six Harmonies Saber technique of Elder Wu contains the generation principles, the restraint principles and the changes of the Eight Diagrams. That lanky man just doesn't know that. I wonder if he can use the 'Crane Snake Eight Attacks'. If he can, the Four Forms Six Harmonies Saber technique will be defeated easily.' (T/Note: Four Forms - 四式 - include Tai Yang, Tai Yin, Shao Yang, Shao Yin; Six Harmonies - 六合 - include East, West, South, North, Up and Down, referring to the universe) Hearing her say those words to help Yun Zhonghe again, the people of the Beggar Society all had an angry expression on their faces. They saw that Yun Zhonghe immediately changed his fighting style, spreading wide his legs and whipping horizontally with the steel claws, looking like a white crane. Wang Yuyan put her mouth close to Duan Yu's ear and whispered: 'This lanky man has walked into my trap. Perhaps his left hand would be chopped off.' Duan Yu was surprised, he asked: 'Really?'

Everyone only saw that the saber technique of Elder Wu was strict and heavy, chopping sidelong and slashing horizontally as if there was no arrangement of stances. He fought more and more slowly, but all of a sudden he swiftly chopped three times. White light flashed. Yun Zhonghe shouted 'Ah', the back of his left hand had already been cut by the blade, the steel claw in his left hand could not be hold firmly anymore, a clang was heard, it had already fallen on the ground. However because his lightness skill was very fast, he hurriedly moved backwards and was able to dodge the three later chops of Elder Wu.

Elder Wu walked towards Wang Yuyan, stood in front of her, held his saber in a straight upright position and said: 'Thanks a lot, Miss!' Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'Elder Wu, your 'Wonderful Door Three Powers Saber' is very refined and subtle!' Elder Wu was surprised, he thought: 'I didn't expect you to know this saber technique of mine.' It turned out Wang Yuyan had deliberately called the saber technique of Elder Wu the 'Four Forms Six Harmonies Saber' and judging from the stances of Yun Zhonghe she had anticipated that he would surely use the 'Crane Snake Eight Attacks' to make him involuntarily get into a dominated situation. As expected, his left hand had nearly been chopped off. (T/Note: Three Powers - 天 地 人 - Heaven, Earth, Man).

The name of the big-nosed man who had the queer voice and was standing next to He Lian Tie Shu was Nu Erhai. Seeing Wang Yuyan help Yun Zhonghe injure Elder Xi with just several sentences, then enable Elder Wu to injure Yun Zhonghe with a few sentences again, he turned towards He Lian Tie Shu and said: 'General, this young Han girl is very strange, if we capture and take her back to First-class Hall then force her to tell everything she knows, it'll prolly be extremely useful.' He Lian Tie Shu said: 'Very good, you go capture her.' Nu Erhai scratched his head and thought: 'This character of General is certainly not very nice. Whenever I suggested a ploy to him he always said: 'Very good, you go handle it.' Making suggestions is easy but handling them is hard. This young girl's martial arts seem to be fathomless. I don't wanna make a fool of myself in front of her. Anyway, today is for rounding up and annihilating these beggars, it'd be better to strike first and prevail.' He made a gesture with his left hand, four of his subordinates immediately walked out.

Nu Erhai took several steps forwards and said: 'Elder Xu, our General wanna see the Dog Beating Stick technique and the Dragon Subduing Eighteen Palms, if you have something

interesting then show it, but if you really don't, we can't afford to wait any longer, we must go now, farewell.' Elder Xu sneered and said: 'High-level martial arts users of your country's First-class Hall have boasted that you all have topnotch martial arts but it turns out you're just mediocre, I'm afraid you don't deserve to see the Dog Beating Stick technique and the Dragon Subduing Eighteen Palms.' Nu Erhai said: 'How to deserve to see them?'

Elder Xu said: 'First you must beat us good-for-nothing beggars, then the head of the Beggar Society will show up...' Saying to here, he suddenly coughed loudly then his eyes hurt intensely and could not open, his tears dripped down continuously. Feeling very frightened, he jumped up, held his breath and quickly kicked three times. Nu Erhai had not expected that this old man whose beard was snow-white would attack as soon as he finished saying and that his movements were so fast like this, he hastily dodged but could only avoid getting hit at the crucial points on his chest, the head of his shoulder had still been kicked. He staggered a few steps then made use of the momentum to leap backwards. Elder Xu jumped up the second time, while still being in the air, he felt weary and numb in his arms and legs and fell down heavily.

The people of the Beggar Society shouted in succession: 'Not good, the Tartars play dirty!' 'What's in my eyes?' 'I can't open my eyes.' Everyone felt a sharp pain in the eyes. Tears streamed out of their eyes. Wang Yuyan, A'Zhu and A'Bi could not open their eyes similarly.

It turned out that in an instant the Western Xia people had already dispersed the 'Sad Weak Clear Wind' in the apricot forest. The 'Sad Weak Clear Wind' was a type of colorless odorless poisonous gas. Its liquid form was made from the poisonous animals gathered from Huanxi valley in Mt. Daxue of Western Xia. Most of the time, it was kept in bottles. When it was used, the user had already had the antidote put into their nose. As soon as the stopper of the

bottle was removed, the poisonous liquid would evaporate and spread into the air gently like a breeze. Therefore, no matter how careful and precise a person was they would still be unable to detect it. When their eyes hurt sharply, the poison had already entered the brain. After being poisoned the victim's eyes would drip with tears, hence 'Sad', their whole body would be unable to move, hence 'Weak', the poisonous gas was colorless and odorless, hence 'Clear Wind'.

Thuds and 'A'yo' sounds could be heard continuously, the people of the Beggar Society fell down one after another.

Duan Yu had eaten the Manggu Cinnabar Frog (T/Note: 牛蛙 - the cinnabar frog which bellows like a bull) therefore he was immune to poison. Even though he had breathed the 'Sad Weak Clear Wind' in, he was neither 'Sad' nor 'Weak'. Seeing that the beggars, Wang Yuyan, A'Zhu and A'Bi all were having a painful expression on their faces he could not understand why and felt very frightened.

Nu Erhai cried out loudly and commanded the warriors to tie the people of the Beggar Society up. He himself went towards Wang Yuyan and stretched out his hand to grab her wrist.

Duan Yu shouted: 'What are you doing?' At that urgent moment he quickly extended his right forefinger, a beam of internal energy was shot out from the finger tip creating chi-chi sounds. It was none other than the 'Six Meridians Divine Swords' of the Duan clan in Dali. Nu Erhai did not know about its powers therefore he paid no attention to it and kept approaching Wang Yuyan to grab her wrist. Suddenly a crack was heard, the bone of his right arm had unaccountably been broken into two pieces. His arm hung down loosely. Nu Erhai cried out painfully and stopped walking.

Duan Yu bent down, gripped the delicate waist of Wang Yuyan then started to use the 'Wave Treading Exquisite

Steps'. Taking three steps forwards at an oblique angle and two strides over to one side, he rushed out of the crowd.

Ye Erniang made a wave with her right hand. A poisonous needle was fired towards the middle of his back. This poisonous needle was very well-aimed and went with a lot of force. In any case Duan Yu should have many difficulties in dodging it. However, he suddenly moved sideways then suddenly went backwards, therefore when the poisonous needle arrived he had already moved to the right side three chi. Three skilled warriors in the group of Western Xia warriors immediately jumped off their horseback, shouted and chased after him. Duan Yu ran to a horse, put Wang Yuyan lying across the saddle, then jumped onto the horse and spurred it to run away.

Western Xia warriors had already guarded the key posts all around the apricot forest. Suddenly seeing Duan Yu running out on a horse they immediately fired arrows. Trees in the apricot forest covered him, more than ten wolf-toothed arrows all stuck into the trees.

Duan Yu cried out: 'Good horse ah good horse, the faster you run the better! When we return, I'll let you eat chicken, eat meat, eat fish, eat goat.' He forgot that horses did not eat meat or fish.

Chapter 17: Today's Wishes

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Both of them rode a horse together. After running very fast for a while they scanned around and saw that there were mulberry trees everywhere, in a short time they had already outdistanced the Western Xia warriors and no longer saw any sign of them.

Duan Yu asked: 'Miss Wang, how do you feel?' Wang Yuyan said: 'I've been poisoned. There's not any strength left in my body.' Hearing the words: 'Been poisoned' Duan Yu was startled. He hurriedly asked: 'Is it serious? How can we find the antidote?' Wang Yuyan said: 'I don't know. You urge the horse on to a safe place then we'll talk about it again.' Duan Yu said: 'Where is safe?' Wang Yuyan said: 'I don't know either.' Duan Yu thought: 'What is it? I've already promised to keep her safe from dangers, why do I ask her to give directions?' Without any feasible idea he had no alternative but to ride the horse aimlessly.

After running quickly for a meal's time they did not hear the sounds of the chasing soldiers anymore and gradually became relax, but the rain started to drip down. Duan Yu kept asking after every short period of time: 'Miss Wang, how do you feel?' Wang Yuyan always replied: 'I'm fine.' Being able to travel together with the beauty Duan Yu was unspeakably happy, but he also feared that the poison in her body would become more dangerous, therefore he could not help but to smile for a while then to be anxious for a while.

The rain became heavier and heavier, Duan Yu took off his gown and covered Wang Yuyan with it. But that only worked for a short period of time, before long both of them were soaked through. Duan Yu asked again: 'Miss Wang, how do you feel?' Wang Yuyan sighed and said: 'Both cold and

wet. Let's find a place to shelter from the rain.' To Duan Yu, whatever Wang Yuyan said was like an imperial decree. When she wanted to find a place to shelter from the rain, even though Duan Yu knew clearly that they had not escaped from dangers he still continuously said yes, but he also dazedly thought: 'The person Miss Wang constantly has in her mind is her biao ge Murong Fu. Today I and she have encountered dangers together I must do my utmost to protect her. Even if I die for her, someday in the rest of her life she'd once in a while remember me a little bit. When she and Murong Fu get married later and have children, when she tells her descendants about the past in leisure time perhaps she'd mention today's events. At that time her head would be full of white hair, when she mentions the three words 'Mr. Duan', her pearly tears would fall down drop by drop...' He lost in thought and could not prevent his eyes from reddening.

Seeing that he had a distressed look on his face and had not started to look for a shelter, Wang Yuyan asked: 'What's wrong? There isn't any rain shelter?' Duan Yu said: 'At that time you'd tell your children...' Wang Yuyan said: 'What, my children?'

Duan Yu was startled, only now did he wake up to reality, he smiled and said: 'Sorry, I was daydreaming.' He looked around and saw a big mill in the northeast. The water of a rivulet was pushing the wooden wheel. The mill was in the process of pounding rice. He then said: 'We can shelter from the rain there.' and rode the horse to the mill. At this time it was raining heavily with cascading noises, all around was haze of water vapor.

He jumped off the horse, seeing that Wang Yuyan looked pale he could not help feeling very sorry for her and asked again: 'You have a stomach ache? Have a fever? Have a headache?' Wang Yuyan shook her head, smiled and said: 'I'm fine.' Duan Yu said: 'Alas, I wonder what the poison the Western Xia people used was, let me go find the antidote.'

Wang Yuyan said: 'It's raining heavily like this! Help me get off the horse first and go inside. It won't be late to talk about it later.' Duan Yu hastily said: 'Yes, yes! You see, I could be very silly.' Wang Yuyan smiled and thought: 'You're just inherently silly.'

Seeing her smiling expression, Duan Yu could not help but to feel as if he was on cloud nine and almost forgot to go open the door of the mill. After opening the door he came back to help Wang Yuyan to get off the horse. Because his eyes had focused on her lovely face all the time, he did not notice that there was a ditch in front of the mill. His left foot stepped right in the middle of the ditch. Wang Yuyan called: 'Be careful!' But it was too late. Duan Yu cried out 'Ah' and fell plump into the mud. He climbed up after struggling for a while. His face, his hands, and his body were covered with mud, he continuously said: 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Are you... are you okay?'

Wang Yuyan said: 'Alas, are you okay? That fall didn't hurt did it?' Duan Yu was over the moon when he saw her showing concern for himself. He hastily replied: 'No, no. Even if it did hurt, there'd still be no problem.' He held out his hands to help Wang Yuyan get off the horse. All of a sudden, seeing that they were covered with mud, he drew them back and said: 'Not good! I go clean up first and will come back to help you.' Wang Yuyan sighed and said: 'You're really fussy. My whole body is already drenched, what's the matter if there's some more mud?' Duan Yu smiled apologetically and said: 'I have only messed things up and haven't cared for you well.' Still he cleaned the mud off his hands in the rivulet before helping Wang Yuyan get off the horse and walk into the mill.

When the two of them entered the mill, they saw the rice-pounding stone pestle being lifted and dropped, continuously hitting rice grains in the stone mortar, but they did not see anybody. Duan Yu shouted: 'Is there anyone here?'

Suddenly, in the straw stack in a corner of the room, two people shouted at the same time: 'A'yo!' They stood up, one was male and one was female, both were eighteen or nineteen year old young peasants. Their clothes were untidy, their heads were full of straws, and their faces flushed red and looked totally embarrassed. It turned out they were a couple of lovers. The peasant girl had been here to pound rice, the man had followed her here to be close to her. Because it had been raining heavily they had thought that no one would arrive, and had gotten really unbridled to such a degree that they had not heard anything even though Duan Yu and Wang Yuyan had been talking to each other outside for quite a while.

Duan Yu held his fist in his hand and said: 'Sorry for disturbing, sorry for disturbing! We only come here to shelter from the rain. If the two of you have something to do, please do as you wish and don't pay attention to us.'

Wang Yuyan thought: 'This bookworm is talking nonsense again. They are meeting us here, how can they keep cuddling each other?' But she could not say those two sentences. After suddenly seeing the expression and attitude of that girl and that man, her face had soon reddened, she did not dare to look at them for long.

Duan Yu wholeheartedly focused his mind on Wang Yuyan therefore he did not care about this couple of young peasants. He helped Wang Yuyan sit down on a bench and said: 'You're totally drenched, what's to be done?'

There was a layer of rosy light on Wang Yuyan's face again. An idea sprung up in her mind. She pulled out from the hair on her temples a gold hairpin in which two big pearls were embedded, turned to the peasant girl and said: 'Sister, I give you this hairpin, can you please lend me a set of clothes to change?'

Even though that peasant girl did not know that the two pearls were precious, but she recognized gold, in her mind she did not believe this was true, and said: 'Let me fetch

some clothes for you to change, this... this gold hairpin I don't dare to take.' As she finished saying she climbed up the wooden ladder beside her.

Wang Yuyan said: 'Sister, please come here.' That peasant girl had already climbed up four or five rungs. She quickly went down, walked to and stood before Wang Yuyan. Wang Yuyan put the gold hairpin in her hand and said: 'I really give you this hairpin. Can you please take me to go change clothes?'

Seeing that Wang Yuyan was beautiful and amiable the peasant girl had already been totally willing to help her, now being given a gold hairpin she felt very happy. She declined unsuccessfully for a few times before finally accepting it then helping Wang Yuyan climb up to the garret above them to change clothes. The garret was stacked with paddy, straws and farm tools such as sieves and bamboo baskets. That peasant girl had some sets of worn-out clothes which she had been sewing and mending. After that young man had arrived, she had thrown them aside and stopped paying attention to them since. Now they were very suitable for Wang Yuyan to use.

That young peasant man timidly peeped at Duan Yu, he was still abashed. Duan Yu smiled and asked: 'Big Brother, what's your name?' That young man said: 'I'm... I'm surnamed Jin.' Duan Yu said: 'So you're big brother Jin.' That young man said: 'No. I'm Jin A'er. Jin A'da is my older brother.' Duan Yu said: 'Hum, so you're second brother Jin.' (T/N: Jin A'er means 'Jin, the second brother', Jin A'da means 'Jin, the big brother'.)

Just saying to here, suddenly they heard horse hoofbeats, more than ten horses was galloping towards the mill. Duan Yu was frightened, he rose to his feet and shouted: 'Miss Wang, the enemies have chased to here!'

Wang Yuyan was being helped by that young peasant girl. She had taken off her wet clothes, wrung water out of them, and was drying herself. Also hearing the horse

hoofbeats, she was worried and frightened, and did not know how to deal with this situation.

The horses ran very fast, in a short period of time they had already arrived at the outside of the door. Someone shouted: 'This horse is ours. That boy and that girl are inside of here.' Wang Yuyan and Duan Yu, one being up on the garret, one being downstairs, secretly complained at the same time and thought: 'Had we led the horse into the mill, it'd have been so much better.' They heard a crash. Someone had kicked the door open, three or four Western Xia warriors rushed into the mill.

Wholeheartedly wanting to protect Wang Yuyan, Duan Yu rushed up the garret. Wang Yuyan had not dressed therefore she had no alternative but to take a wet gown to put before her chest. After being poisoned she felt very weak, therefore after her left hand had raised the gown to her chest, it dropped down. Duan Yu hastily turned around and said in a panicky manner: 'I'm sorry for offending you, Miss, pardon me, pardon me.' Wang Yuyan hurriedly said: 'What should we do?'

They heard a warrior ask Jin A'er: 'Is that girl upstairs?' Jin A'er said: 'Why do you ask about other people's daughter?' A thump was heard, that warrior had thrown a punch which had hit and sent him flying away for more than one zhang then falling down. Jin A'er was very stubborn. He immediately shouted abuse at the warrior.

The peasant girl said: 'Brother A'er, Brother A'er, don't exchange insults with other people.' Caring about her lover, she climbed down to persuade him. Without warning, that Western Xia warrior brandished his saber then split Jin A'er head in half. The peasant girl was appalled. She fell and rolled down from the wooden ladder. Another warrior gripped her and said with a hideous grin: 'This chick gives herself up to me.' There was a sound of tearing. He had already torn her clothes. That peasant girl stretched out her hand and gave him a fierce claw in the face, immediately

creating five streaks of blood. The warrior raged, with all his strength he threw a punch which hit her chest. Her ribs were all broken. She died immediately.

Hearing the agonized cries downstairs Duan Yu stuck his head out to have a look. When he saw that the couple of young peasants had suffered sudden unfortunate deaths, he was very sorry and muttered to himself: 'It's totally my fault for dragging the two of you into this so that you suffered horrible deaths.' Seeing that warrior quickly climbing up the wooden ladder, he hurriedly gave it a shove towards the outside. The wooden ladder was only loosely connected to the floor of the garret therefore it immediately fell outwards. That warrior quickly jumped down on the ground, held and stopped the ladder, then connected it to the garret's floor again. While Duan Yu was attempting to shove it one more time, another warrior raised his right hand, a sleeve-hidden arrow was shot at him. Duan Yu did not know how to dodge it. A 'pu' sound was heard, the sleeve-hidden arrow had stuck into his left shoulder. While Duan Yu was pressing his shoulder with his hand, the first warrior took advantage of that opportunity to connect the ladder to the garret's floor and climb up. Each of his steps climbed up three rungs.

Wang Yuyan was sitting on a pile of paddy behind Duan Yu, seeing how that warrior have killed the peasant girl with a palm strike (T/N: Something wrong here, cause she was killed w/ a punch) and the lightness skill he had used to jump off and climb up the ladder, she said: 'You use your left forefinger to press the 'Xiaguan acupuncture point' on his belly.'

When he had learned the 'Beiming Divine Skill' (T/N: In Chinese myths, Beiming is the ocean at the northern extremity of the world where sunlight can't reach) and the Six Meridians Divine Swords in Dali, he had already remembered clearly every acupuncture point on the human body. While he was hearing Wang Yuyan shouting, that warrior had already set his left foot on the edge of the

garret. Not having time to think anymore, he extended the forefinger and poked him in the 'Xiaguan acupuncture point' on his belly. That warrior was running up, his belly was totally unprotected. He uttered a loud cry, then fell directly backwards on the ground from midair and died immediately.

Duan Yu cried out: 'This's strange, this's strange!' He saw another shaggy-bearded Western Xia warrior brandishing his long saber to protect his body and climbing up the ladder. Duan Yu asked: 'Where to poke him, where to poke him?' Wang Yuyan said in fright: 'A'yo, this's bad!' Duan Yu asked: 'Why bad?' Wang Yuyan said: 'The movements of his saber are too fast, if you wanna poke him in the 'Shanzhong acupuncture point' on his chest, when your finger hasn't touched it, your arm would've already been chopped off.'

When she had just said to here, that shaggy-bearded warrior had already reached the edge of the floor. Duan Yu wanted to protect Wang Yuyan with all his heart therefore he did not think about the possibility that his arm might be chopped off. He stretched his right arm, utilized his internal energy, extended his finger and poked the warrior in the 'Shanzhong acupuncture point' on his chest. That warrior raised his saber to chop at Duan Yu's arm, but all of a sudden he screamed out 'Ah' then fell down on his back. From a small hole on his chest blood was spouting up to two chi's (t/n: one chi ~ 33.33 cm) high. Wang Yuyan and Duan Yu were both surprised and happy. Neither of them had expected the power of that finger attack to actually be this dangerous.

Because Duan Yu had continuously killed two of them in a very short period of time, the rest of the warriors did not dare to climb up to the garret anymore. They gathered downstairs to discuss.

Wang Yuyan said: 'Mr. Duan, you should pull the sleeve-hidden arrow out of your shoulder.' Duan Yu was very happy and thought: 'So she also cares about the arrow wound on my shoulder.' He held out his hand and plucked the sleeve-

hidden arrow from his shoulder. This arrow had gone one cun (t/n: one cun ~ 3.333 cm) into his body and already touched the bone in his shoulder therefore using sheer force to pull it out like this was extremely painful, but because he was happy he did not care about that at all. He said: 'Miss Wang, if they go up here to attack again, how you think should we deal with them?' While saying he turned his head to look at Wang Yuyan. Suddenly seeing that she was still loosely dressed he hastily turned around and said: 'A'yo, I'm sorry.'

Wang Yuyan felt so ashamed that her face became very red, but she did not have any strength to dress. An idea suddenly appeared in her mind. She then got into the stack of straws, only stuck her head out, smiled and said: 'It's all right, you can turn around now.'

Duan Yu slowly turned sideways, his whole body was prepared, if he saw that she was still untidily dressed exposing her skin, he would turn away immediately. When he had just turned half of his head around, he caught a glimpse of a Western Xia warrior on the outside of the window. The warrior was standing on a horse's back, sticking his head in and looking around wanting to jump into the garret. Duan Yu hastily said: 'There're enemies on this side.'

Wang Yuyan thought: 'How are this man's martial arts?' She said: 'You throw the sleeve-hidden arrow at him.'

Duan Yu followed her advice and threw the sleeve-hidden arrow in his hand out. He was totally an amateur in using missiles therefore the sleeve-hidden arrow he threw did not have the least bit of accuracy and was at least two chi's away from that man's head. That man at first did not pay attention, but this throw of Duan Yu was extremely powerful, it was just a small sleeve-hidden arrow yet a whizzing sound was heard when it flew out. That man was frightened. He hunkered down to dodge and curled up into a heap on the saddle.

Wang Yuyan stuck her head out and saw clearly. She said: 'He's a wrestling expert of Western Xia. Just let him grip you,

then hit the top of his skull with your palm, you'll win.'

Duan Yu said: 'This's easy.' He walked to the window and saw that warrior jumped up from the saddle, broke the window's lattice and plunged into the garret. Duan Yu said: 'Why do you come here?' That warrior did not understand the Han language. He glowered at Duan Yu then held out the left hand and gripped his chest immediately. The movements of this man were really fast, right after gripping Duan Yu he straightened his arm and lifted him in the air. Duan Yu sent backwards a palm strike. There was a plop. He had already hit the top of the man's head. That warrior had originally wanted to throw Duan Yu on the garret's floor then wrestle him near dead but he had not expected to be hit by this palm strike. His skull was crushed into pieces. He died immediately.

Duan Yu had killed a man again. He could not help starting to panic. The more he thought the more frightened he got, he shouted: 'I don't want to kill anymore! I can't kill anymore. You guys get away quickly!' He then used his strength to push the corpse of the wrestling expert downstairs.

In total, there were fifteen Western Xia warriors who had chased him to the mill. At this moment there were twelve left. Four of them were experts of First-class Hall, two being Han, the other two being Western Xia. Those four people saw that Duan Yu's martial arts seemed to be incomparably excellent for a while then seemed to be laughably childish for another while, which was really suitable to be regarded as 'being fathomless', therefore for the moment they did not dare to act rashly and gathered to quietly discuss attacking plans. However those eight Western Xia warriors had a different plan, they put straws inside the mill together and wanted to set fire to everything.

Wang Yuyan said in panic: 'This is bad. They wanna set fire to the mill!' Duan Yu stamped his feet and said: 'What should we do?' Seeing the big hydraulic wheel of the mill

being pushed by the water of the rivulet, ceaselessly moving up and moving down, his mind was also up and down like the movements of the wheel.

He heard a Han man called: 'General has ordered us to capture that young girl. We can't kill her. Don't torch this mill.' Then he raised his voice and shouted: 'Hey, little bastard and little puss! Quickly go down here and surrender, or else we'll torch the mill, burning you alive and turning you into two roast pigs.' He shouted continuously three times. Duan Yu and Wang Yuyan ignored him. That man took out some tinder, started a fire, then ignited a handful of straws, raised it with his hand and said: 'If you keep resisting, I'll start burning.' As he finished saying he raised the kindling and assumed a posture which looked as if he wanted to throw it into the stack of straws.

Seeing that the situation was desperate, Duan Yu said: 'Let me take them by surprise.' He climbed on the hydraulic wheel. This wheel was very big, its diameter exceeded two zhang's (t/n one zhang ~ 3.333m), and it was even higher than the roof of the mill. Duan Yu held on to some planks of the wheel, following the rotation of it, he slowly came down.

That man was still shouting noisily and loudly ordering Duan Yu and Wang Yuyan to surrender, not knowing that Duan Yu had quietly come down from the garret and extended his finger to poke him in his back. He was using the Shaoyang sword technique of the Six Meridians Divine Swords. One poke should do the job, however, while sneakily attacking other people he felt very scared, therefore the momenta of his attacks were inadequate and his internal energy could not be shot out. Whether Duan Yu's internal energy could be shot out or not had merely been a matter of luck and this time he could not shoot it out. That man felt that his back had suddenly been lightly touched by something. He turned his head around and saw Duan Yu poking at his own back with his finger.

The man had seen with his own eyes how Duan Yu had continuously killed three people. Now, seeing Duan Yu moving his right hand in a disorderly manner and perhaps using some kind of evil technique he was rather afraid as well, therefore he hastily jumped leftwards. Duan Yu threw another finger attack, but still nothing happened, which was hard to understand. That man shouted loudly: 'Stinking boy, what are you sneakily doing?' He stretched out his left hand and made a grab at the top of Duan Yu's head. Duan Yu hurriedly shrunk back and made random grabs with his hands. Fortunately he caught hold of the wheel and was immediately moved upwards by it. That man's grab missed Duan Yu. A 'pu' sound was heard. Wood chips were sent flying all around. His grab had broken and created a big gap on a plank of the hydraulic wheel.

Wang Yuyan said: 'You only need to go around to his back then attack the 'Zhiyang acupuncture point' at his seventh vertebra, he'll be in danger. This man is a disciple of Tiger-clawed School in Jinnan. The Zhiyang acupuncture point isn't trained by his martial arts practice.'

Duan Yu was in midair, he shouted: 'That's very good!' then climbed up the wooden wheel and jumped into the main room of the mill.

The Western Xia warriors did not wait until his feet touched the ground. Three of them immediately tried to grab him at the same time. Duan Yu continuously shook his right hand and said: 'I'm being outnumbered, even a brave man can't beat multiple opponents at the same time, I only wanna fight one-on-one.' As he finished saying he leaned and advanced on one side, using the footwork of the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps', after dodging several times, he was already at the back of that man. He shouted loudly: 'Hit!' and threw a finger attack, a chi-chi sound was heard, the 'Zhiyang acupuncture point' of the man was hit. He could not make even a single sound and died instantly.

After killing that man, Duan Yu wanted to follow the hydraulic wheel again to go up and return to Wang Yuyan's side. But it was already too late because another Western Xia warrior had blocked his way out and was slashing at him with his saber. Duan Yu shouted: 'A'yo, how terrible! The Tartar soldiers have severed my route of retreat. All around are ambushes, soldiers are besieging Gaixia, my important business has gone bust!' He strode leftwards, that slash hit nothing. The other eleven in the mill immediately surrounded Duan Yu and attacked him at the same time with their sabers and swords. (T/n: Gaixia – the location where Xiang Yu was besieged by Liu Bang's army and eventually committed suicide)

Duan Yu shouted loudly: 'Miss Wang, see you in the next life. I've been besieged on all sides. It's hard to even protect myself. I have no choice but to wait for you on the way to the Underworld.' Even though he was shouting in a disorderly manner and looked extremely pathetic, the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' footwork that he was using was incomparably masterful.

Wang Yuyan was entranced looking at it. She said: 'Mr. Duan, you are following the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps', right? I have heard of it but don't know its method.'

Duan Yu happily said: 'Yes, yes! You wanna see it, then I'm gonna perform it from beginning to end one time for you. But I don't know if I can reach the end before you see my head getting chopped off.' He then performed the footwork he had learned from the scroll, starting from the first step.

Those eleven Western Xia warriors tried to punch and kick him and brandished their sabers and swords, but they could not touch even a corner of his clothes. All of them shouted: 'Hey, you block this side!' 'You guard the northeast corner, don't hold back when attacking.' 'A'yo, this's not good, the little turtle egg has slipped away from here.'

Duan Yu kept going forwards one step then going backwards one step, moving around the hydraulic wheel and

the stone mortar. Even though Wang Yuyan was smart and learned, she was not able to understand the method. She said: 'Dodging the enemies is more important to you, don't perform for me to see.' Duan Yu said: 'I can't miss this good chance! If I don't perform now, after I die you won't be able to see it.'

He did not care about his own life and only wished to perform the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' from beginning to end for the person he loved to see. Who would have ever expected that a love-smitten person had their own good luck? If he waited for the enemies' attacks to come before using the footwork to dodge; firstly, because he did not know martial arts while the enemies were experts, and their stances were seemingly false and real at the same time and very unpredictable, he would not be able to dodge when he wanted to; secondly, the enemies had eleven people in total, if he successfully dodged the first man, he would not be able to dodge the second one, even if he successfully dodge the second man, he would not be able to dodge the third one. But he only focused on his own footwork and paid absolutely no attention to the enemies, therefore eleven people of them all pursued and attacked him. Every step of this 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' went to places that were definitely not expected by other people. They saw his left foot striding eastwards, but to their surprise, in fact his body had moved to the northwest corner. The eleven people attacked faster and faster, but ninety percent of their stances had ended up attacking the people on their own side, the remaining ten percent had totally missed.

Seeing Duan Yu standing beside the hydraulic wheel, the first, the second, and the third immediately attacked the place where they thought he would move to with their fists, legs, sabers and swords. The fourth, the fifth and the sixth used their weapons to attack the place where he was standing. While Duan Yu was dodging, he suddenly changed direction. Bang bang bing bing, ding dang clang clang, the

weapons of the first, the second, the third, the fourth... had all hit the same place. You blocked and fought me, I blocked and fought you. Some Western Xia warriors had been a little bit slow and had been injured by the people on the own side.

After seeing just a few stances Wang Yuyan already knew the principle, she shouted: 'Mr. Duan, your footsteps are very clever and complicated, for the moment I can't understand them clearly. It'd be best if after finishing this round you perform another round.' Duan Yu said: 'Okay, I'll always follow your instructions.' Once he finished stepping according to eight times eight equaling sixty four hexagrams, he restarted from the first step of the technique.

Wang Yuyan considered: 'For the moment Mr. Duan's life is not in doubt, but how to escape from this difficult situation? I haven't put clothes on my upper body. This really makes me feel ashamed to death. The only choice is to think of a way to give Mr. Duan directions so that he'd kill all the eleven enemies.' She immediately stopped watching Duan Yu's footwork and looked carefully at the stances of those eleven people.

Suddenly she heard a clack. Someone had put the wooden ladder against the edge of the garret. A Western Xia warrior wanted to climb up to the garret again. Because all eleven of them had been fighting Duan Yu unsuccessfully for a long time, the leader of the Western Xia people had told his subordinate to capture Wang Yuyan first and talk about it later.

Wang Yuyan panicked. She shouted: 'A'yo!'

Duan Yu raised his head and saw that Western Xia warrior climbing up to the garret on the ladder. He hastily asked: 'Where to hit him?' Wang Yuyan said: 'You'd best grab his 'Zhishi acupuncture point'!' Duan Yu strode forwards and grabbed the 'Zhishi acupuncture point' on the back of his waist. Not knowing what he should do next, he conveniently made a throw, by lucky coincidence he threw the warrior

into the rice-pounding stone mortar. The stone pestle which weighed two hundred jin's (t/n: one jin = 0.5 kg) was driven by the hydraulic wheel. All the while it had been pounding on the stone mortar unceasingly. The grains in the stone mortar had been turned into very fine rice powder for a long time, but because there was no one to look after the mill, the stone pestle still kept pounding as usual. After that Western Xia warrior had fell into the stone mortar, the stone pestle went down, a 'peng' was heard, it had burst his brain open, his blood splashed on the rice powder.

That Western Xia expert repeatedly urged his subordinates forwards, there were three other Western Xia warriors trying to be the first to climb up the ladder. Wang Yuyan shouted: 'Do the same thing!' Duan Yu held out his hand to grab the 'Zhishi acupuncture point' of another man then made a throw with all his strength, throwing that man into the stone mortar. This time he intentionally threw therefore the power he used was not as perfect as it had been the last time. When the stone pestle fell down, it hit the man's waist. He let out a miserable bloodcurdling scream, but for the moment it was impossible for him to die. Every time the stone pestle fell down, he let out a miserable scream.

Duan Yu was dumbfounded. Seeing that two other Western Xia warriors had already been climbing up the ladder, he shouted in panic: 'Don't do that! Quickly come down.' He poked chaotically with his left-hand fingers. Because he was frightened, his internal energy was in turmoil. Therefore the power of the Six Meridians Divine Swords was able to be shot out. Two 'chi-chi' sounds were heard. Two beams of internal energy hit the backs of those two men. They immediately fell down.

The remaining seven Western Xia warriors saw that Duan Yu could kill people from a distance by poking in the air. They had really never heard of this kind of technique before. They did not know that Duan Yu could not use this technique

as he pleased, when he had really wanted to use it he had not necessarily been able to, but when he had used it randomly at urgent moments he had often been successful. The more those seven people thought about this the more frightened they became. All of them had already become rather timid but they were not willing to run away at this point too.

Wang Yuyan was looking down from a higher position therefore she had observed the fight in the big room clearly. She saw that even though there were seven enemies left, only three of them had rather good martial arts, and that Western Xia man who had shouted and given orders was perhaps the leader of this group. She shouted: 'Mr. Duan, you go kill that man who is wearing yellow clothes and a leather hat first. You need to find a way to hit the 'Yuzhen' and 'Tianzhu' acupuncture points at the back of his head.'

Duan Yu said: 'Yes, Miss.' and rushed towards that man.

That Western Xia man was secretly frightened and thought: 'The two acupuncture points Yuzhen and Tianzhu are exactly my weak points, how does this girl know that?' Seeing Duan Yu charging at him, he immediately chopped horizontally with the saber to prevent him from approaching. Duan Yu charged at the man several times but he was still unable to go to his back and was almost injured by the saber. That man had heard Wang Yuyan shouting that his own back had had weak points therefore he was earnestly defending the weak points on the back of his head otherwise Duan Yu would have been in great danger. Duan Yu shouted: 'Miss Wang, this man is very tough, I can't go to his back.'

Wang Yuyan said: 'That man who is robed in gray, his weakness is the 'Lianquan acupuncture point' on his neck. That yellow-bearded man, I don't recognize his martial arts stances, you should try hitting him in the chest with some finger attacks.' Duan Yu said: 'Yes!' He extended his finger and pushed it quickly towards the man's chest. Even though these finger attacks of his were technically correct they did

not carry any power, but how could that yellow-bearded man know that? He immediately lowered his body and dodged three finger attacks. When Duan Yu attacked the fourth time, he jumped up in the air then from midair delivered his attacks downwards. The power of his palm strikes was fierce and encompassed Duan Yu's body.

Duan Yu felt that his breathing had become hurried and also felt dizzy. Very frightened, he closed his eyes and thrust the fingers of both hands chaotically. 'Chi-chi-chi-chi' sounds were heard continuously, the Six Meridian Divine Swords Shaoshang, Shangyang, Zhongchong, Guanchong, Shaochong and Shaoze were shot out at the same time and pierced six holes in the body of that yellow-bearded man. But the power of his palm strikes did not vanish, a pat was heard, a palm strike had hit Duan Yu's shoulder. At that moment, Duan Yu's internal energy surged through his body, even though this palm strike had a lot of force, thanks to the protection of his vigorous internal energy, it did not injure him a little bit, moreover, that yellow-bearded man was sent flying away for one zhang.

Wang Yuyan did not know that he was not injured, she said in panic: 'Mr. Duan, are you okay? Are you injured?'

Duan Yu opened the eyes and saw that yellow-bearded man was flat on his back, blood was spouting ceaselessly from the six small holes on his chest, his expression was ferocious, his eyes opened wide and were looking viciously at himself. He had still not died. Duan Yu was so scared that his heart started to pound in his chest, he shouted: 'I don't wanna kill you. You yourself... yourself were asking for it.' He was still using the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' and scampering in the main room. During that time he continuously cupped his fist, bowed to the remaining six people and said: 'Brave men, there was no enmity between me, Duan Yu, and you in former days. In the past few days there was no enmity between us either. Please open your net and allow me a way out. I... I... really don't dare to kill

anyone again. This... this... having killed this many people, how can I not feel terribly guilty? Really, I've been overly merciless. You run away quickly, okay? Let's consider that I, Duan Yu, have lost, please... please... I beg your pardon.'

When he turned around he suddenly saw a Western Xia warrior standing beside the door. No one knew when he had entered the mill. That man was medium in stature. His clothes were the same as those of the other Western Xia warriors, but he had a sallow complexion and a wooden face, looking just like a corpse. Duan Yu felt a chill of fear: 'Is this man a ghost? Could it be that... could it be that... because the souls of the Western Xia warriors killed by me couldn't vanish, their unfairly-treated ghosts show up?' He said in a tremulous voice: 'You... Who are you? What... What do you wanna do?'

That Western Xia warrior stood with his back straightened, neither did he reply nor did he make a move. Duan Yu leaned to one side, made a grab backwards and caught hold of the 'Zhishi acupuncture point' on the back of the waist of a Western Xia warrior beside himself, then threw that warrior at the mysterious person. That person slightly moved sideways. A 'peng' sound was heard. The head of that Western Xia warrior had hit the wall. His skull was shattered into pieces and he died. Duan Yu let out a deep breath and said: 'You're a man, not a ghost.'

At this moment, besides the incoming mysterious person, there were only five Western Xia warriors left. Among them, one Western Xia man and one Han man were experts of 'First-class Hall'. The other three had mediocre martial arts, seeing that the number of people on their own side had gotten smaller and smaller as the fight had gone on, they all wanted to retreat, one of them went to the door and pushed it. That Western Xia expert shouted: 'What are you doing?' Shua shua shua, using his saber he chopped three times towards Duan Yu.

Seeing a blue light flashing and the sharp saber of the opponent being brandished to and fro repeatedly before him, which could cut his own body at any time, Duan Yu was extremely frightened. He shouted: 'You... you're insolent like this, I can hit your Yuzhen and Tianzhu acupuncture points, you won't be able to resist, you'd be well advised to... well advised to withdraw, we'd better disperse.' The saber stances of that man became more and more urgent and every stance was close to vital parts of Duan Yu. Had he not accelerated his steps, any of those stances would have taken his life.

That Han expert had always stayed behind, seeing that Duan Yu was making every effort to implore and besides trying his best to dodge he could not strike back at all, an idea sprung up in his mind. He went to the stone mortar, grabbed two handfuls of rice flour, which had been pounded to a very fine state, and threw them at Duan Yu in the face. Duan Yu's footwork was clever therefore those handfuls of rice flour did not hit him. That Han man kept throwing out two handfuls after two handfuls. In the main room rice flour and rice bran fluttered in all directions, in an instant looking like smoke and mist.

Duan Yu shouted: 'How terrible, how terrible! I can't see anything!' Wang Yuyan also knew the situation was extremely dangerous. She thought it was all because of that very clever 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' that Duan Yu had been safe from those experts. All along, when attacking him, the enemies had seen him before themselves but suddenly somehow he would have already been at their backs, therefore their weapons, punches and kicks had always missed his body by a hair's breadth. At the moment, rice flour and rice bran had spread all over the main room like smoke and everyone was executing his stances randomly. Fighting blindly and chaotically like this made it very possible to hit him. If the Western Xia warriors just ignored Duan Yu, rushed forwards and executed any set of

martial arts on their own, Duan Yu would soon be cut into seventeen or eighteen pieces.

Because rice flour had got into his eyes, Duan Yu could not open them. He jumped up with all his strength and landed beside the hydraulic wheel. He grabbed hold of a plank of the wheel and was lifted up. There were two miserable 'Ah' 'Ah' cries. Two Western Xia warriors had accidentally been chopped at by that Western Xia expert with his saber and died. After that, two clanks were heard, someone shouted: 'It's me!' Another shouted: 'Be careful, it's me!' The Western Xia expert and the Han expert had just clashed their saber and sword and exchanged two stances. Then there was another miserable 'Ah' cry, another Western Xia warrior had been given a kick in his vital part by someone and was sent flying outwards. Hearing that dying cry, Duan Yu could not help but to feel a chill down his spine. His whole body trembled. He shouted in a quavering voice: 'Hey hey, the number of you has gotten fewer and fewer, there's no need to fight anymore. Don't kill excessively. I beg you, okay?'

Hearing the voice, that Han man was able to detect Duan Yu's direction. He made a wave with the right hand and a steel dart was thrown at him. This steel dart went with great accuracy and power, but because the hydraulic wheel was revolving unceasingly, when it arrived, Duan Yu had already been moved down by the wheel. There was a 'pai' sound. The steel dart had nailed a corner of his sleeve to a plank of the wheel. Frightened, Duan Yu thought: 'I don't know how to dodge missiles, if the enemies focus on throwing steel darts and sleeve-hidden arrows I'll suffer a disaster.' He was so frightened that his hands flagged, his fingers could no longer hold on to the plank. A 'teng' sound was heard, he had already fallen down.

In the dense mist, the Han expert vaguely saw that, he rushed forwards to grab Duan Yu. Duan Yu remembered Wang Yuyan had said that he needed to poke him in the

'Lianquan acupuncture point', but firstly, because he was in a state of panic, and secondly, even though he knew the acupuncture points, he had never practiced martial arts in normal times, therefore when he extended his finger to hit the 'Lianquan acupuncture point' of that man in a disordered manner the direction of his attack was inaccurate, both slanted leftwards and inclined downwards, amazingly hitting the 'Qihu acupuncture point' of that man. The 'Qihu acupuncture point' was the laughing acupuncture point. The internal energy of that man immediately ran in the opposite direction, he could not help laughing ha-ha loudly. Executing a thrust after a thrust, he attacked Duan Yu nonstop with his sword, but all the while he kept laughing loudly hee-hee, ha-ha, hei-hei, ah-ah...

The Western Xia expert asked: 'Brother Rong, why are you laughing?' The Han man was unable to answer and kept laughing loudly. The Western Xia man did not understand the cause of that, he said angrily: 'We're facing a tough enemy. What the hell are you doing?' That Han man said: 'Ha-ha, I... this... ha-ha, ah-ah...' He raised his sword and thrust at the back of Duan Yu. Duan Yu walked to the left at an angle. That Western Xia expert did not see clearly in the dense mist and he happened to also move to this side, therefore all of a sudden both of them had a heavy collision with each other.

As soon as this Western Xia man bumped into Duan Yu's body, he quickly turned his left hand over and using a grasping hand technique he grabbed Duan Yu's right arm. He noticed that his opponent's strong point was the footwork therefore he thought this grasp was exactly a good chance to obtain advantage. He threw the saber away with his right hand, then withdrew the hand and grabbed Duan Yu's left wrist. Duan Yu shouted: 'How terrible, how terrible!' and used all his strength to struggle. But the hands of that Western Xia man were like iron hoops, how could he struggle out of it?

Thinking that this was a good opportunity, the Han man raised his sword and thrust at the back of Duan Yu. The Western Xia man thought: 'This's not good! This thrust of his only needs to pass into the body of the enemy several cun's (t/n 3.333 cm) to kill him. But if he disregards comradeship and wanna take all the credit for himself, maybe he'll go for a chi (t/n 33.33 cm), conveniently killing me as well.' He immediately took a step backwards, pulling Duan Yu along.

Still laughing nonstop, that Han man took a step forwards wanting to raise his sword and thrust again. Suddenly there was a 'peng' sound. A plank of the hydraulic wheel had hit the back of his head making him pass out. Even though that Han man had lost consciousness, he was still breathing and kept laughing ha-ha-ha nonstop, but because he only had the air and not the strength, his laughs sounded very strange. The hydraulic wheel slowly revolved, another 'peng' sound was heard. The second plank had hit his chest. His laughs became a bit lower. After getting hit seven or eight times, the 'ha-ha, ha-ha' sounds he made sounded just like the snores of someone who was dreaming.

Seeing that Duan Yu was being gripped and unable to pull away, Wang Yuyan felt extremely anxious. She also thought that there was still a Western Xia warrior with a scary expression standing beside the door, if he conveniently gave Duan Yu a saber or sword stroke, Duan Yu would be killed instantly. She shouted in panic: 'Don't kill Mr. Duan. We... we should discuss this slowly.'

That Western Xia man was still gripping Duan Yu. He placed his right arm horizontally and pressed it against the chest of Duan Yu with full power, wanting to crush his ribs or make him unable to breathe and die. Duan Yu was extremely frightened. His left wrist and right arm were being gripped therefore the 'Beiming Divine Skill' which absorbed internal energy could not be used. He had no choice but to extend his left fingers and pushed chaotically with them, but all of his finger attacks only hit the air. He felt the pressure on his

chest getting heavier and heavier, and gradually he could no longer breathe.

At that critical moment, suddenly there were several 'chi-chi' sounds, that Western Xia expert uttered a soft 'Ah' cry and said: 'Good skill, you've finally poked me... poked me in the Yuzhen...' His hands gradually loosened and his head drooped. He leaned against the wall and died.

Very surprised, Duan Yu turned that man over to have a look. He really saw a small hole at the 'Yuzhen acupuncture point' on the back of his head. Blood was oozing from it. This wound had been inflicted on him by his Six Meridians Divine Swords. Duan Yu did not understand for the moment what had happened. He did not know that in that urgent situation his internal energy had condensed and the energy of one of his finger attacks had hit the wall, sprung back, and hit the back of the head of that Western Xia expert. Duan Yu had executed several tens of finger attacks altogether. One after another they had bounced off the wall and hit every place on the back of the enemy. Because that Western Xia man had had a strong internal energy and the power of the rebounded energy had been very weak, they had not been able to damage him at all. But by lucky coincidence the last beam of internal energy had bounced off the wall and hit his 'Yuzhen acupuncture point'. The 'Yuzhen acupuncture point' had been his weakness and most fragile point therefore even though the rebounded internal energy had been weak he had nevertheless died instantly when it had hit him at that acupuncture point.

Duan Yu was both surprised and happy. He released the corpse of that Western Xia man and shouted: 'Miss Wang, Miss Wang, all the enemies have been killed!'

Suddenly he heard an icy voice from behind himself: 'All haven't necessarily died!' Duan Yu was frightened. He turned around and saw that it was the Western Xia warrior with a wooden expression. He thought: 'I overlooked you, but your martial arts aren't good. I can kill you with just a

grip on your 'Zhishi acupuncture point.' He then laughed and said: 'Old chap, you run away quickly, okay? I definitely won't kill you.' That man said: 'Do you have the ability to kill me?' His tone was extremely arrogant. Duan Yu was really unwilling to kill again therefore he cupped his fist and said: 'I'm really not a match for you, please show your mercy and forgive me.'

That Western Xia warrior said: 'These sentences of yours are merely a jest. They have absolutely no sincere intention of begging for mercy. The Solitary Yang Finger (t/n: Yiyangzhi) and the Six Meridians Divine Swords of the Duan clan are well-known all over the world, in addition to that, this girl has told you important secrets, they're really no small matter. Let me experience your masterful stances.' Every word of these few sentences was said monotonously with no high or low sound, no rise or fall of the voice and no pause therefore they sounded very unusual. Perhaps he was a foreigner, because even though he knew the Han language and his use of words and grammar were correct, his tone was obviously very awkward.

Duan Yu innately disliked martial arts. Today he had killed so many people like this only because the situation had forced him to do so and he had had no alternative. Speaking of fighting, if it was possible to avoid fighting he would try his best to. He immediately gave a deep bow and sincerely said: 'You are very correct to be critical of me. I must confess my intention of begging for mercy was not respectful and sincere. I have never learned martial arts. Just now, it was sheer luck that I killed people. Being able to preserve my life, I'm already perfectly content, how dare I flaunt my skills and vie for superiority?'

That Western Xia warrior laughed grimly and said: 'You haven't learned martial arts yet with a raise of your hand you annihilated four experts of First-class Hall and killed eleven warriors. If you learn martial arts, would there still be survivors in wulin?'

Duan Yu took a glance from the east to the west. Seeing that in the mill corpses were lying in disorder and each of them was covered in blood, he could not help feeling extremely sorry. He covered his face and said: 'How... how did I kill this many people? I... I really don't wanna kill anyone. What should I do now? What should I do?' That man let out some grim laughs and glanced at Duan Yu to see if these few sentences arose out of his true feelings. Duan Yu shed tears and said: 'These people all have parents, wives and children. Not long ago every one of them was still full of vim and vigor, now they were all killed by me, I... I... how can I apologize to them?' Saying to here he could not help but beat his chest and cry loudly. His tears fell down like rain drops. He sobbed: 'They might not necessarily want to kill me. It's just that they were acting under orders and were assigned to capture people. That's all. I and they didn't know each other before, why could I lay my murderous hands on them so quickly?' His heart was inherently benevolent. Since childhood he had chanted Buddhist scriptures and learned Buddhism, and had not dared to harm even ants and mole crickets, how could he have known that today this kind of catastrophe would suddenly happen?

That Western Xia warrior sneered: 'You're play-acting like a cat crying over a mouse's death. You think you'll be exempted from punishments by it?'

Duan Yu held back his tears and said: 'That's right, I already killed people and committed sins. What's the point of crying? I'd better bury these corpses carefully.'

Wang Yuyan thought: 'There're more than ten corpses like this, how long will it take to bury them one by one?' She shouted: 'Mr. Duan, I'm afraid there're more enemies coming in large quantities. We should run away as soon as possible.' Duan Yu said: 'Yes, yes!' He turned around, wanting to climb up the ladder.

That Western Xia warrior said: 'You haven't killed me, how can you go?' Duan Yu shook his head and said: 'I can't kill

you. Besides, I'm not a match for you either.' That man said: 'We haven't fought, how can you know that you're not a match for me? Miss Wang taught you the Wave Treading Exquisite Steps, ha-ha, you're sure extraordinary.' Duan Yu at first had wanted to say that the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' technique had not been taught to him by Wang Yuyan, but he thought that there was no need to tell a stranger about this matter therefore he only said: 'Yes, moreover I haven't learned any martial arts. I've escaped from disasters totally thanks to being given directions by Miss Wang.' That man said: 'Very good, I'm waiting here. You go ask her to tell you a way to kill me.' Duan Yu said: 'I don't wanna kill you.'

That man said: 'You don't wanna kill me then I'll kill you.' As he finished saying he picked up a saber on the ground, suddenly in the main room a white light flashed, within a more than one zhang (t/n: 3.333 m) radius of him there were full of saber images. When Duan Yu had still not taken a step he had already been hit heavily on his shoulder with the back of the saber. He let out an 'Ah' shout and staggered. As soon as his footsteps became disordered that Western Xia warrior took advantage of the situation and rushed forwards. The edge of the saber was already put on the back of his neck. Duan Yu was so frightened that his whole body broke into a cold sweat. He only stood motionlessly, stunned.

That man said: 'You quickly go consult your master to see if she has any way to kill me.' As he finished saying he withdrew the saber and swiftly extended his left leg cleverly. A 'peng' sound was heard. He had kicked Duan Yu sending him rolling on the ground.

Wang Yuyan shouted: 'Mr. Duan, quickly go up here.' Duan Yu said: 'Yes!' then climbed up the ladder. He turned his head around and saw that man sitting and holding the saber. There was still a wooden expression which was similar to that of a corpse on his face. Obviously he thought absolutely nothing of Duan Yu and would definitely not take

advantage of the time he was climbing up the ladder to sneakily attack from his back. After having climbed up the garret, Duan Yu said in a low voice: 'Miss Wang, I can't beat him. We should find a way to run away quickly.'

Wang Yuyan said: 'He's guarding downstairs, we can't run away. Please take that gown for me.' Duan Yu said: 'Yes!' then held out his hand and took a set of worn-out clothes left by that peasant girl. Wang Yuyan said: 'Close your eyes then come here. Okay! Stop. Put it on for me, you mustn't open your eyes.' Duan Yu complied with everything she said. He was a sincere gentleman and esteemed Wang Yuyan as if she was a heavenly god therefore he did not dare to disobey her words at all, but when he thought that at the moment her clothes were not enough to cover her body, his heart unavoidably pounded in his chest.

Wang Yuyan waited until he finished dressing her then said: 'Okay. Help me stand up.' Duan Yu had not yet heard the order that he could open his eyes therefore they were still closed tightly. When he heard her say 'Help me stand up' he immediately put out his right hand and inadvertently touched her cheek. Feeling that there was something smooth and soft in his palm, he could not refrain from starting with fright. He hastily withdrew his hand and said continuously: 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'

When Wang Yuyan had been having him dressing herself she had already felt so ashamed that her cheeks had become very red. Now seeing him with his eyes closed extending his palm and touching her face in a disorderly manner she blushed even more. She said: 'Hey, I told you to help me stand up!' Duan Yu said: 'Yes! Yes!' His eyes were still closed tightly therefore he did not know where he should move his hands to, fearing that if he touched her body his misdemeanor would become serious. He could not help feeling at a loss and totally troubled. Wang Yuyan's mind was also in turmoil. Only after a good while did she remember that she needed to tell him to open his eyes. She

said in a displeased-sounding tone: 'Why don't you open your eyes?'

That Western Xia warrior sneered ha-ha downstairs and said: 'I told you to go learn martial arts to kill me, and didn't tell you two to flirt with and cuddle each other.'

Duan Yu opened his eyes. Seeing that Wang Yuyan's beautiful cheeks had turned red like fire, looking extremely charming and shamefaced, he was entranced and gazed fixedly at her therefore he totally did not hear those sentences of the Western Xia warrior. Wang Yuyan said: 'You help me stand up and sit down here.' Duan Yu hastily said: 'Yes, yes!' With reverence and awe he supported her body with his hands and helped her sit down on a wooden bench.

Both hands of Wang Yuyan quivered, trying to pull the clothes on her body together. She bowed her head and considered. After a long time she said: 'He didn't reveal his martial arts, I... I don't know how to beat him.' Duan Yu said: 'Is he very tough?' Wang Yuyan said: 'Just now when he fought you, he used seventeen types of martial arts of different schools altogether.' Duan Yu asked in surprise: 'What? He used seventeen different types of martial arts in such a short while?'

Wang Yuyan said: 'Yes! Just a moment ago, when he used the saber to confine you he slashed one time in the east, it was the Demon Subduing Saber technique of Shaolin Monastery; he chopped one time in the west, it was the Eighteen Ways of Firewood Chopping Saber of the old man surnamed Li in Lishan cave in Guangxi; when he turned the saber and cut one time, it was changed again to the 'Revolving Wind Brushing Willow Saber' of the Shi clan in Jiangnan. After that he executed eleven saber strokes continuously using eleven different types of saber techniques of different schools. Afterward he turned the saber over and hit your shoulder with its back one time, it was the 'Mercy Saber' created by monk Xinguan of Tiantong

Monastery in Ningbo which only controls the enemy but doesn't kill them. When he put the saber on your neck, it was a stance of the Golden Saber technique that His Excellency Grandpa Yang of our imperial court used to capture enemies in battle. It was one of the 'Three Unique Stances behind the Mountain' which originally was a stance for long-handled large chopping sabers but he changed it to using normal saber. Lastly, when he kicked and sent you rolling, it was a Springing Leg stance of the Hui people in Western Xia.' She talked about one stance after another as if she was counting the valuable items in her family, explaining clearly the origin of each and every stance and the school it belonged to. Duan Yu heard what she said but he knew nothing therefore he could only gaze at her, not knowing how to get a word in.

Wang Yuyan leaned her head and thought for a long time then said: 'You can't beat him. Just admit defeat.'

Duan Yu said: 'I've already admitted defeat.' Then he raised his voice and said: 'Hey, I can't beat you in any case, are you willing to give up at this point?'

The Western Xia warrior sneered: 'You want me to spare your life, that's not hard, you just need to follow my words in one matter.' Duan Yu hastily asked: 'What's the matter?' That man said: 'From now on, every time you see me you must crawl on the the ground, kowtow to me three times and shout: 'Great Master, please spare this little dog's life!''

Once hearing that, Duan Yu boiled with anger and said: 'One can kill a gentleman but cannot insult him. If you want me to kowtow to and beg you, don't imagine that's possible. If you wanna kill me, then just kill me now.' That man said: 'You're really unafraid of death?' Duan Yu said: 'Naturally I'm afraid of death. But if every time seeing you I must kneel down and kowtow to you, what the heck will that become?' That man sneered and said: 'There's nothing wrong with you kowtowing to me when seeing me. If one day I become the

Emperor of Central Plains, you'll have to kneel down and kowtow to me when seeing me, won't you?'

Hearing him say 'If one day I become the Emperor of Central Plains', Wang Yuyan felt scared: 'Why does he also say this kind of words?'

Duan Yu said: 'Kowtowing when seeing the Emperor, that's another matter. It's a salute, and certainly not begging for mercy.'

That Western Xia warrior said: 'So that means you don't accept this condition of mine?' Duan Yu shook his head and said: 'I'm very sorry but I can't obey your order. Old chap, I deeply beg you to be magnanimous a little.' That man said: 'Okay, you go down here, I'll kill you in one saber stance.' Duan Yu cast a look at Wang Yuyan, he felt grieved and said: 'You already insist on killing me, there's no way I can do anything about it, but I also have one thing to beg you.' That man said: 'What?' Duan Yu said: 'This lady is suffering a strange poison. She doesn't have any strength in her limbs and can't walk. Can you please at your convenience take her to her home at Mantuo Villa by Tai Lake?'

That man ha-ha laughed and said: 'Why should I do this? The East Conquering General of Western Xia has given a military order, that is, whoever captures this learned and talented girl will be rewarded with two thousand gold taels and be conferred on with the Marquis of Ten Thousand Houses title (t/n 萬戶侯 - Wanhū Hóu).' Duan Yu said: 'That's okay. I'll write a letter, after you've taken this lady back to her home, you can bring this letter to Dali to get five thousand gold taels, the Marquis of Ten Thousand Houses title will also be conferred on you accordingly.' That man ha-ha laughed loudly and said: 'You think I'm a three year old kid? Who the heck are you? Depending on a letter you little boy write can really get me five thousand gold taels and the conferment of the Marquis of Ten Thousand Houses title?'

Duan Yu thought this matter was really hard for other people

to believe. For the moment he did not know what to do, his hands continuously rubbing against each other. He said: 'This... This... What should I do? I won't regret it if I die, but if I let you wander around this area and fall into the hands of the bandits then even if I died ten thousand times I still wouldn't be able to redeem myself.'

Wang Yuyan heard him say that very sincerely therefore she could not help but feel somewhat moved. She said loudly to the Western Xia man: 'Hey, if you're rude to me, my biao (t/n: an older cousin with a different surname than the speaker's) will avenge me. He will surely throw Western Xia into a state of extreme confusion and won't spare even fowls and dogs.' That man said: 'Who's your biao?' Wang Yuyan said: 'My biao is Mr. Murong, a famous figure of wulin in Central Plains. I think you've heard of the reputation of 'Murong of Gusu' and the 'Paying Him Back Using His Own Methods' technique (t/n: 以彼之道, 还彼之身). If you're rude to me, he'll treat you badly ten times as much.'

That man sneered and said: 'If Mr. Murong saw you and this pretty boy being intimate with each other like this, how would he still be willing to avenge you?'

The face of Wang Yuyan became very red. She said: 'Don't talk rubbish. I and this Mr. Duan don't have... don't have any...' Thinking that this kind of matter should not be talked a lot about, she changed the topic of conversation and asked: 'Hey, master soldier, what's your name? Do you dare to tell me your name?'

That Western Xia warrior said: 'Why not? When going I don't change my surname, when sitting I don't change my given name, it's Li Yanzong of Western Xia.'

Wang Yuyan said: 'Hum, your surname is Li, that's Western Xia's national surname.'

That man said: 'The national surname isn't everything about me. I serve my country with unreserved loyalty, and will take Liao, destroy Song, wipe out Tufan in the west and annex Dali in the south.'

Duan Yu said: 'Your ambitions really aren't small. General Li, let me tell you this. You're proficient at using secret techniques of different schools so if you wanna become the number one martial user under heaven, I think that's not hard. But if you wanna annex all the lands under heaven, it's not like being the number one martial arts user under heaven you'll be able to get that done.'

Li Yanzong let out a 'humph' sound and did not reply.

Wang Yuyan said: 'Speaking of becoming the number one martial arts user under heaven, you may not necessarily be able to achieve that goal.' Li Yanzong said: 'How do you know?' Wang Yuyan said: 'In the world at the moment, as far as I know, there're two people whose martial arts are far above yours.' Li Yanzong took a step forwards, raised his head and asked: 'Who are they?' Wang Yuyan said: 'The first person is the former Chief of the Beggar Society Chief Qiao.' Li Yanzong let out a 'humph' sound and said: 'His reputation is great, but he may not necessarily be worthy of it.' Wang Yuyan said: 'The second person is my biao, Mr. Murong Fu of Jiangnan.'

Li Yanzong shook his head and said: 'That's not necessarily true either. You put Qiao Feng's name before Murong Fu's name out of fairness or out of personal reasons?' Wang Yuyan asked: 'What is out of fairness? And what is out of personal reasons?' Li Yanzong said: 'If it's out of fairness, then you really think Qiao Feng's martial arts are better than Murong Fu's; if it's out of personal reasons, then because Murong Fu and you are relatives, you rank a stranger before him.' Wang Yuyan said: 'Out of fairness or out of personal reasons are just the same. I naturally hope that my biao surpasses Chief Qiao, but at the moment it's still out of the question.' Li Yanzong said: 'Though it's still impossible now, what Qiao Feng excels at are just the martial arts of one school. But your biao has extensive knowledge about the world's martial arts, in the future his

skills will improve every day so he'll be able to become the number one martial arts user under heaven.'

Wang Yuyan sighed and said: 'That still won't be possible. In the future, the number one martial arts user under heaven will likely be this Mr. Duan.'

Li Yanzong turned his face upwards, laughed ha-ha and said: 'Turns out you can joke. This bookworm has merely been given directions by you and learned just the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps'. Don't tell me that depending on those scampering off like a frightened rat skill and withdrawing into passive defense and fleeing like a turtle skill he'll be able to get the number one martial arts user under heaven title?'

Wang Yuyan at first had wanted to say: 'His 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' technique wasn't taught by me. His internal energy is vigorous. His base is solid. No one can compare with him.' But she changed her mind: 'This man seems to be narrow-minded. If I speak the truth, perhaps it won't be possible for him not to kill Mr. Duan. I'd better incite him a bit.' She then said: 'If he's willing to follow my instructions and practice martial arts, three years later, perhaps he still won't be able to surpass Chief Qiao, but if he wanna defeat you, that'll be as easy as turning his hand over.'

Li Yanzong said: 'Very good, I believe your words. To not leave behind the cause of trouble of the other day, I'd better kill him in a saber stance today. Mr. Duan, you get down here, I wanna kill you.'

Duan Yu hastily said: 'I won't go downstairs, you... you can't go up here either.'

Wang Yuyan had not thought that she would overreach herself. To her surprise this man was not incited. She could only sneer and say: 'So you're afraid and fear that three years later he'll outstrip you.'

Li Yanzong said: 'You're using a provoking trick to make me spare his life. Ha-ha, what kind of man I am? How can it

be that I could easily be fooled? Want me to spare his life, it's not hard. I already said before, he only needs to kowtow and beg for mercy every time he sees me, I definitely won't kill him'

Wang Yuyan looked at Duan Yu, thinking that he would definitely not do that kind of kowtowing and begging for mercy thing therefore the only choice left in this situation was to fight with their backs against the wall. She lowered her voice and asked: 'Mr. Duan, sometimes the energy swords in your fingers work and sometimes they don't. What's the cause of that?' Duan Yu said: 'I don't know.' Wang Yuyan said: 'You'd better use your full power to try stabbing him in his right wrist with your energy swords, snatching his long sword then clasping your arms around him tightly and using the 'Snow Melting Six Suns Skill' to remove his internal energy.' Duan Yu said in surprise: 'What's the 'Snow Melting Six Suns Skill'?' Wang Yuyan said: 'That day at Mantuo Villa, when you subdued Mama Yan to save me, didn't you use this kind of divine skill of the Duan clan in Dali?' Only now could Duan Yu realize what it was. That day Wang Yuyan had mistaken his 'Beiming Divine Skill' for the 'Energy Dissolving Great Technique' which was hated by many people in wulin. At that moment, it had been too late for him to explain therefore he had unthinkingly said that it had been a skill called 'Snow Melting Six Suns Skill' that had been handed down in the Duan clan in Dali from generation to generation. He had blurted it out therefore he had already forgotten about it, but Wang Yuyan remembered clearly every martial arts of various schools in the world, let alone this kind of extraordinary strange skill.

Duan Yu nodded, thinking that there was really no other way besides this way, but it was not assured, in brief, it boded ill rather than well. He then righted his clothes and said: 'Miss Wang, I'm incompetent and not able to escort you back to your mansion. I'm really ashamed. Someday, after having returned to your mansion in honor and glory, when

you and your biaoxiong (t/n: one's older male cousin with a different surname) get married, don't forget to pour down some cups of wine on the camellia trees I myself planted at Mantuo Villa, then I'd be considered as having drunk your wedding wine.'

Hearing him say that in the future she and her biaoage may get married Wang Yuyan was glad, but she also could not bear seeing him going out for other people to oppress like this. She said in a sad voice: 'Mr. Duan, your great kind act of saving my life, as long as I'm alive I won't dare to forget.'

Duan Yu thought: 'If I gotta helplessly see you and Mr. Murong get married in the future, I'll get madly jealous and my mind will be in torment, it'd be hard for me to live. It'd be better to die for you today so that I'd feel at ease and justified.' He turned around and smiled to her then step by step went down on the rungs.

Wang Yuyan looked at his back and thought: 'This man's very strange, at this moment how can he still smile?'

After Duan Yu had climbed down the ladder, he stared at Li Yanzong and said: 'General Li, it's impossible for you not to kill me, so let's start!' As he finished saying he took a stride, which was none other than the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps'.

Li Yanzong brandished his saber. Shua shua shua, he slashed three times using three other saber techniques of different schools. Wang Yuyan did not consider it to be strange. She thought that among weapons saber had the most schools and stances, therefore if a person was really learned, even if he executed seventy or eighty stances continuously, he would not have to go as far as to use the second stance of any saber technique of a school. Once this 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' technique of Duan Yu was used, it was really unpredictable and very strange. Li Yanzong wanted to use the movements of the saber to confine Duan Yu, but even though several times obviously

he had already surrounded him somehow Duan Yu astoundingly stepped out of the encirclement like a ghost. Seeing that Duan Yu could manage to defend himself this time, Wang Yuyan felt a bit more optimistic. She only hoped that he would suddenly attack when the enemy was not ready and emerge victorious from danger.

Duan Yu secretly channeled his internal energy wanting to shoot it out of his five right fingers, but every time it always stopped when it reached his arm and inexplicably went back. Fortunately, he was already extremely skilled at using the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' therefore even though Li Yanzong had sped up his saber stances, all along he had not hit Duan Yu's body.

Li Yanzong had seen with his own eyes how Duan Yu had killed the Western Xia experts with the bizarre energy of his finger attacks. This moment, seeing Duan Yu poking and drawing in the air with his fingers and being deliberately mystifying, he naturally did not know that it was Duan Yu being unable to make his internal energy come out and only thought that this was the executing method before using his evil technique. He thought when Duan Yu finished performing all of his rites and saying his incantations, he would use this murderous invisible evil technique. Therefore he could not help feeling frightened and considered: 'Besides the bizarre footwork this dude's martial arts are very mediocre, but his evil technique is dangerous, I must kill him before he uses it. But my saber has always missed him, what should I do?' An idea sprung up in his mind. He already had a plan. He sent a palm strike backwards which hit the hydraulic wheel and broke a large piece off a plank then made a grab with his left hand, held that piece of wood in his hand and threw it at Duan Yu's foot. Because Duan Yu was running like the wind, that piece of wood certainly did not hit him. But Li Yanzong continuously threw punches and hand chops, breaking all kinds of household utensils in the

mill such as bamboo baskets and rice sacks, grabbed and threw them at Duan Yu's feet.

There were more than ten corpses lying in the mill in disorder, and in addition to that, there were a lot of broken household utensils like this, where could Duan Yu still put his feet on? His 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' totally depended on advancing and retreating elegantly like the wind blowing on the water surface, being natural and unimpeded. But this moment, every step he took was hindered by objects, when he did not stumbled, he stepped on the heads and bodies of the corpses, therefore how could this important secret of 'floating freely like riding the wind' still be achieved? He knew that if he slowed down just a little he would be parted from his life instantly. Therefore he decisively did not look at the ground and only stepped according to the footwork that he had well practiced. Whether his steps were high or low, whether there were strange sounds under his feet, or whether the tips of his toes kicked something weird, he did not care at all.

Wang Yuyan also realized that the situation was not all right and shouted: 'Mr. Duan, you quickly rush out of here and run away by yourself, if you keep fighting him here, your life will be in danger.'

Duan Yu shouted: 'Unless I already get killed, that's unthinkable. As long as I can still breathe I'll protect you carefully.'

Li Yanzong sneered and said: 'Your martial arts are worthless, but you're the sentimental type, treating Miss Wang with deep affection and serious love like this.' Duan Yu shook his head and said: 'That's wrong, that's wrong. Miss Wang is like a god while I, Duan Yu, am just an ordinary man, how can I dare to talk about love or something like that? As she values me, she's willing to follow me to find her biao ge. I must repay her for this kind appreciation of me.' Li Yanzong said: 'Hum, she's following you to search for her biao ge Mr. Murong, so in her heart she thinks nothing of you at all. You

have such wishful thinking, isn't that like a toad wanting to eat swan meat? Ha-ha, ha-ha! This can make me laugh to death!'

Duan Yu was not angry at all. He said solemnly: 'You say I'm like a toad and Miss Wang is like a swan, these comparisons are very correct. But I, the toad, am different than the other toads. As long as I see the swan several times, I am already satisfied and don't have any other wish.'

When Li Yanzong heard Duan Yu say 'I, the toad, am different than the other toads', he could not help laughing loudly. It was strange that even though his laughs were resonant his facial muscles were still stiff as usual, and his face did not have any smiling expression. Duan Yu had seen people like Prince Yanqing did not even move their lips while speaking therefore even though Li Yanzong had a strange appearance, he did not find it very surprising. He said: 'Speaking of wooden expression, you're still very far behind Prince Yanqing. You're not qualified to become his disciple as well.' Li Yanzong said: 'Who's Prince Yanqing?' Duan Yu said: 'He's a Dali expert. Your martial arts are quite inferior to his.' Actually he could not tell whether other people's martial arts were good or bad at all, but he thought that anyway I was going to die at your hands soon, there was no harm in saying a few words that were unpleasant to the ear to make you angry.

Li Yanzong let out a 'humph' sound and said: 'My martial arts are good or bad, how could a boy like you understand?' His mouth talked yet all the while the saber in his hand had still been brandished with great ease and more and more urgently.

Seeing that Duan Yu was swaying, his footsteps suddenly became disorderly, and the situation was very difficult, Wang Yuyan shouted: 'Mr. Duan, you quickly run to the outside, if you wanna hold him back, the outside is still the same.' Duan Yu said: 'You can't move, if you stay here alone my mind won't be at ease. There're many corpses here, a

young girl like you is certainly scared, I'd better stay here with you.' Wang Yuyan sighed and thought: 'You're so silly, taking into consideration even whether I'm afraid of corpses but disregarding the chance that you yourself will get killed in a flash.'

At that moment, whenever Duan Yu put his feet down he kicked or tripped on something. Several times the blade of the enemy passed by and missed the top of his head and his body by a hair's breadth. He was so scared that he trembled uncontrollably and continuously thought: 'If in a slash like this he cuts off half of my head, it certainly won't be fun. A gentleman is flexible. For the sake of Miss Wang, I'd better kneel down, kowtow and beg him to spare my life.' Even though he thought so, in the end he could not say it.

Li Yanzong sneered: 'I see that you are already extremely frightened and only wanna run away.' Duan Yu said: 'Life and death are important matters, who aren't frightened? After the death, everything will be ended. I already thought of running away but I can't run away.' Li Yanzong said: 'Why?' Duan Yu said: 'It's no use talking much. I'm counting from one to ten, if you still won't be able to kill me, you mustn't follow and cling to me like a leech. You can't kill me, I can't kill you either. If we keep playing hide and seek tediously like this, it would make Miss Wang, a bystander, feel very bored and unhappy.'

He opened his mouth and counted without waiting for Li Yanzong to agree: 'One; two; three...' Li Yanzong said: 'What's your stupid game?' Duan Yu kept counting: 'Four; five; six...' Li Yanzong laughed and said: 'Why on earth are there humdrum dudes like you? You've really disgraced the words 'Martial arts'.' Hu-hu-hu he slashed continuously three times. Duan Yu accelerated his footsteps, his mouth also counted faster: 'Seven; eight; nine; ten; eleven; twelve; thirteen... Okay, I've counted to thirteen yet you still haven't killed me, why haven't you admitted defeat? I see that you're already hungry. Your mouth is dry too. Just go to

Songhe Tower in Wuxi, have some cups of wine and eat some delicacies, how pleasant!’ Seeing that the enemy was unwilling to give up, he wanted to use wine and food to tempt him.

Li Yanzong thought: ‘I’ve met countless tough enemies in my life, but none of them is like this dude. Saying that he’s skilled is not correct but saying that he’s stupid isn’t correct either, his martial arts aren’t good and aren’t bad. He’s rare in the world. If I keep being entangled with him, who knows where it’ll all end? I’m afraid if I become slightly careless and get hit with his evil technique, I’ll lose my life here instead. I must think of another surprising plan.’ He knew that Duan Yu cared about Wang Yuyan very much therefore he suddenly raised his head, looked at the garret and shouted: ‘Very good, very good, you guys quickly kill the girl then come down to help me.’

Duan Yu was very frightened, thinking that there were really enemies having climbed up to the garret to attack Wang Yuyan. He hastily raised his head. His footsteps became slightly slower. Li Yanzong made a sweep of his own leg which hit Duan Yu and sent him falling. His left foot stepped on the chest of Duan Yu and his steel saber was put on his neck. Duan Yu extended his finger wanting to poke, but Li Yanzong’s right hand slightly increased pressure, the blade of the saber immediately went into his flesh several fen’s (t/n: one fen = 0.3333 cm). He shouted: ‘Make a move, and I’ll cut your head off in an instant.’

At this moment, seeing clearly that there was no enemy on the garret Duan Yu immediately felt relaxed. He smiled and said: ‘So you fooled me, Miss Wang is not in danger.’ After that he sighed and said: ‘What a pity, what a pity.’ Li Yanzong asked: ‘Pity what?’ Duan Yu said: ‘Your martial arts are very good. At first you could be regarded as a brave man so if I, Duan Yu, had died at your hands, it’d have made sense. But, unexpectedly, you couldn’t beat me with martial arts. Instead you used a trick and followed the way of

despicable scoundrels. Don't tell me that I won't die an unfair death?'

Li Yanzong said: 'I've never been incited by other people. If you think you'll die an unfair death and feel discontent, then bring a lawsuit to the King of Hell!'

Wang Yuyan shouted: 'General Li, hold on.' Li Yanzong said: 'What?' Wang Yuyan said: 'If you kill him, then unless you also kill me immediately, there'll be one day I'll kill you to avenge Mr. Duan.' Li Yanzong was startled and said: 'Didn't you say you wanted your biao to find me?' Wang Yuyan said: 'My biao's martial arts may not necessarily be better than yours but I have the ability to kill you.' Li Yanzong sneered and said: 'How do you know?' Wang Yuyan said: 'Though your knowledge about martial arts is extensive, it's still less than half of mine. At first when I saw that your saber technique had many varieties I had a high opinion of you, but after seeing fifty stances, I thought your saber technique was merely like that. It's seemingly unkind to say that 'all your tricks have been exhausted', but in brief, your knowledge is still far inferior to mine.' (T/n: All your tricks have been exhausted - 技已用盡 - Taken from Liao Zongyuan's 'Three Warnings: The Donkey of Qian' (Qian - Guizhou province) which literally means 'The tricks of the Donkey of Qian have been exhausted'.)

Li Yanzong said: 'The saber technique I've used so far doesn't have two stances belonging to the same school. How do you know that my knowledge is far inferior to yours? How do you know if I still have many unused martial arts?'

Wang Yuyan said: 'Just now when you used the 'Flying Sand in the Great Desert' stance of Yushu School in Qinghai, Mr. Duan quickly stepped over, had you used the seventeenth stance of the 'Feathered Raiment Saber' of Taiyi School then used the 'Clear Wind Slowly Coming' stance of Lingfei School you'd have already flattened him. Why did you gotta be flashy and use the Hao Clan's Saber Technique of Shanxi? And why did you gotta use a trick, fooling him

into losing concentration because of caring about me, to get a victory? I see that you don't know anything about saber techniques of Taoist schools (t/n: Taiyi School - 太一 - is a Taoist school).' Li Yanzong said without thinking: 'Saber techniques of Taoist schools?' Wang Yuyan said: 'Yes. I guess you think Taoists are only good at swordsmanship, but you don't know that the saber techniques of famous Taoist schools have softness in hardness, which is another achievement.' Li Yanzong sneered and said: 'Your words are really conceited. Saying like this, you must be passionately in love with this Duan-surnamed boy.'

Wang Yuyan blushed and said: 'Passionately in love what? I never have anything called 'love' for him. But he already dies for me so I certainly should be determined to avenge him.'

Li Yanzong asked: 'You won't regret saying this in any way?' Wang Yuyan said: 'Of course I won't regret at all.'

Li Yanzong let out some sneers, took out from his bosom a porcelain bottle and threw it onto Duan Yu's body. A 'shua' sound was heard, he had already put the saber back in its sheath. His silhouette then flashed, in an instant he was already on the outside. There was a neigh, followed by hoofbeats 'clop-clop'. Strangely, the rider made the horse run farther and farther, and thus he left.

Duan Yu stood up and stroked the trace of saber on his neck. It still felt a little pain. He felt as if he was dreaming. Wang Yuyan had not expected this to happen either. Both of them, one upstairs, one downstairs, gazed at each other, feeling both happy and surprised.

After a long while, Duan Yu said: 'He left.' Wang Yuyan also said: 'He left.' Duan Yu laughed: 'Excellent, excellent! He inexplicably didn't kill me. Miss Wang, your accomplishments in martial arts outclass his, he was afraid of you.' Wang Yuyan said: 'Not necessarily, had he killed you, after that he'd have needed only one saber stance to kill me, wouldn't that have been neat and tidy?' Duan Yu

scratched his head and said: 'That's right. But... But... Hum, he saw that you're just like a goddess, how could he dare to kill you?'

Wang Yuyan blushed and thought: 'A bookworm like you regards me as a god. But how could this kind of cruel and merciless Western Xia warrior care about me?'

Seeing that she suddenly had a shy expression, Duan Yu did not understand why and said: 'I wanted to disregard my life and keep you safe by all means. Thankfully, you're safe and sound, and I can still continue living my little life, this can be considered utmost luck.'

He took a step forwards, a 'dang' sound was heard, a small porcelain bottle had dropped on the ground. It was the bottle that Li Yanzong had thrown onto his body. He picked it up, had a look and saw that there were ten seal characters written on the bottle: 'A breath will instantly remove the Sad Weak Clear Wind.' Duan Yu muttered: 'What's the 'Sad Weak Clear Wind'? Hum, this's likely the antidote.' He pulled the stopper out of the bottle. An unbearably strange stinking smell went straight into his nose. Feeling dizzy and almost passing out, he was frightened and hastily put the stopper back in the bottle, then shouted: 'I'm fooled. I'm fooled. How stinky! It's like going into an abalone and fish market!' (T/n: An abalone and fish market - 蚌魚市場 - taken from the Analects of Confucius to emphasize the idea that Duan Yu was a bookworm.)

Wang Yuyan said: 'Please take it for me to sniff, maybe fighting poison with poison will prove effective.' Duan Yu said: 'Yes!' then brought the porcelain bottle to Wang Yuyan and said: 'This thing is very stinky and hard to bear, do you really wanna try?' Wang Yuyan nodded. Duan Yu held the stopper in his hand but he had not removed it yet.

In a very short time, countless thoughts spun in his mind: 'If this antidote is really useful and removes the poison inside her, she won't need to depend on my help. Her abilities are one hundred times better than mine, why would

she want me to go with her? Even if she doesn't forbid me to follow her, when she meets the person of her heart Murong Fu, would I just stand to the side and helplessly watch them being affectionate endlessly towards each other? Hear them talking about love? Could it be that I, Duan Yu, really have this ability? Would I be able to stay calm and maintain my composure? Would I be able not to show any sulky expression and not to say any resentful word?'

Seeing him having a dazed expression and not saying a word, Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'What are you thinking? Just take it for me to sniff. I'm not afraid of the stink.' Duan Yu hastily said: 'Yes, yes!' then removed the stopper of the bottle and moved the bottle to Wang Yuyan's nose. Wang Yuyan took a deep breath then said in fright: 'A'yo, it's really stinky.' Duan Yu said: 'Yes. I already said it likely wasn't useful.' He wanted to put the bottle into his bosom but Wang Yuyan said: 'Let me try sniffing it one more time.' Duan Yu put the porcelain bottle next to Wang Yuyan's nose again. He himself did not know if he was hoping that the antidote would be effective or not.

Wang Yuyan frowned, covered up her nostrils with her hand, smiled and said: 'I'd rather be unable to move my limbs than sniff this stinking thing... Ah! My hand, my hand can move already!' It turned out she had already unconsciously raised her right hand and covered her nostrils with it. Previously, it had been very strenuous and difficult for her to even press and keep the clothes wrapping around her body immobile.

As she was happy, she took the bottle in Duan Yu's hand and sniffed it deeply. Knowing that this stinking gas was very effective, she did not fear it anymore and took several sniffs. The softness and weakness in her limbs gradually faded away. She turned towards Duan Yu and said: 'Can you please go downstairs? I wanna change clothes.'

Duan Yu hastily said: 'Yes, yes!' and quickly went downstairs. Seeing that corpses were lying everywhere, and

except for the couple of young peasants the rest had been killed at his own hands, he felt extremely regretful. He saw that the eyes of a Western Xia warrior were still wide opened and looking at him. Really, that man had died with an everlasting grievance. He made a deep bow and said: 'Old chap, if I hadn't killed you, then you would've killed me. At that time lying here wouldn't have been you but would've been Duan Yu instead. I had no alternative, but my mind really is extremely uneasy and regretful. In the future when I've returned to Dali, I will definitely invite eminent monks to chant scriptures and release the souls of all of you from suffering.' He turned around, cast a look at the corpses of the couple of young peasants, then turned his head towards the corpses of the Western Xia warriors and said: 'I was the person you wanna kill and Miss Wang was the person you wanna capture, why did you gotta kill innocent people?'

Wang Yuyan had finished changing clothes. She took the wet clothes and went down using the ladder. Her limbs were still slightly aching and weak. Seeing Duan Yu looking at the corpses and mumbling endlessly she smiled and asked: 'What are you saying?' Duan Yu said: 'I only feel that having killed this many people, my mind is deeply regretful and uneasy.'

Wang Yuyan muttered: 'Mr. Duan, do you know why that Western Xia warrior surnamed Li gave me the antidote?'

Duan Yu said: 'This... this... I don't know either... Ah... I already know. He... he...' He said the word 'He' continuously several times. Inwardly he wanted to continue saying: 'He must have started to admire you.' But he thought if he said that a rude and cruel Western Xia warrior like this man had started to admire Wang Yuyan, wouldn't that offend the belle? She is incomparably beautiful and all people have a love for beauty, if everyone admired her, what would be so rare about this great admiration I, Duan Yu, have for her? Wouldn't I and every other man in the world be exactly alike? Alas, being willing to die for her, what's so amazing

about it? Let alone I haven't died for her. Thinking to here, he said: 'I... I don't know.'

Wang Yuyan said: 'Maybe there're Western Xia warriors coming in large quantities. We must leave quickly. You decide where should we go to.' In her heart she naturally wanted to go find her biao, but she found it embarrassing to say it straightforwardly like that.

Duan Yu knew clearly what her worries were therefore he said: 'Where do you wanna go to?' Asking this question he felt greatly distressed in his heart. He only waited for her to say 'I wanna go find my biao' to put on a bold face and say: 'I'll go with you.'

Wang Yuyan twiddled with the porcelain bottle in her hand, blushed and said: 'This... this...' After a while she continued: 'The brave men of the Beggar Society have been poisoned with this 'Sad Weak Clear Wind' poison, if my biao was here, he might take the antidote for them to sniff. Besides, I'm afraid A'Zhu and A'Bi have already fallen into the hands of the enemies...'

Duan Yu jumped up and said loudly: 'Yes! The two ladies A'Zhu and A'Bi are in danger. We must immediately go forwards and think of a way to save them.'

Wang Yuyan thought: 'This matter is very dangerous. Depending on the abilities of the two of us, how can we save people from the hands of Western Xia warriors? But A'Zhu and A'Bi are trusted maids of my biao, I already know that they've fallen into the hands of the enemy, how is it possible not to save them? There's no choice but to play it by ear.' She then said: 'Very good, let's go.'

Duan Yu pointed at the corpses lying in disorder on the ground and said: 'We must bury them properly and investigate the name of each one, then at the grave of each person we must set up a tombstone. Someday, when their families come here to look for their remains to move to their native lands, there'll be a piece of evidence.'

Wang Yuyan giggled and said: 'Okay, you stay here to take care of their funeral arrangements. Dressing and laying them in coffins, burying them, issuing obits, receiving condolences, reading funeral addresses, making couplets, performing memorial services, releasing hungry ghosts, it seems there're also things like the first seventh day, the second seventh day and so on. After seven times seven equaling forty nine days, you go notify their families' members one after another for them to come here for moving the remains and reburial.' (T/n: Things that need to be done in a traditional Chinese funeral.)

Duan Yu noticed that there was a mocking undertone in her words. After thinking, he himself also found what he wanted to do is unsuitable. He also smiled and said: 'In your opinion, what should we do?' Wang Yuyan said: 'Burning up everything with a fire, wouldn't that be better?' Duan Yu said: 'This... hum, doesn't it seem to be too disrespectful?' He muttered to himself for a long while, then seeing that there was not any better way, he had no choice but to go find kindling and ignited the stack of straws in the mill. In a short period of time after they got to the outside of the mill a fierce flame rose high into the air and blazed chaotically.

Duan Yu respectfully knelt down, kowtowed and said: 'Forms and bodies are impermanent, and cannot be maintained forever. You brothers today lost your lives at my hands. Perhaps that's the karmic retribution for your previous lives. I hope your souls will go to the Paradise and escape from the sufferings of the Samsara forever. Please don't blame me, please don't blame me.' Only after mumbling for a long while did he stand up.

There were ten horses tethered under the tree outside of the mill. They were the horses that the Western Xia warriors had ridden. Duan Yu and Wang Yuyan each rode a horse and ran along the wide road. They vaguely heard 'tang-tang' sounds of gongs and a hullabaloo of people shouting,

peasants in the neighborhood was rushing to the mill to fight fire.

Duan Yu said: 'Oh well, a big mill was burnt because of me, I feel extremely sorry.' Wang Yuyan said: 'Why are you saying so many womanish words like this? Though my mother is a woman, she acts straightforwardly and resolutely. When she says she'll do something, she'll definitely do it. You're a man, yet you have so many worries and rules.' Duan Yu thought: 'Your mother frequently kills people, uses human flesh to make a fertilizer for flowers, how can I be a match for her?' He said: 'I killed so many people like this for the first time and set other people's house on fire, so unavoidably I feel somewhat frightened and disturbed.' Wang Yuyan said: 'Hum! That's right, someday when you've got used to it, you wouldn't be concerned.' Duan Yu was startled. He waved his hand repeatedly and said: 'Absolutely impossible, absolutely impossible. One time is already excessive, how can it be done once more? (T/n: 不可能再犯 - Duan Yu took this sentence directly from Zuo Zhuan 左傳) Things like killing people and committing arson can't be done again.'

Wang Yuyan and he were riding their horses side by side. She turned her head and looked at him. Feeling very surprised, she said: 'In jianghu, things like killing people and committing arson happen every day. Mr. Duan, from now on you wash your hands of them and no longer get involved in jianghu right?' Duan Yu said: 'My bofu (伯伯 - father's elder brother) and my father wanted me to learn martial arts. I said I wouldn't agree to learn anything. Unexpectedly, the situation became critical and eventually still forced me to learn. Alas, I don't know how I should act.' Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'So your ambitions are to study and become an official then in the future become a scholar or prime minister, right?' Duan Yu said: 'That's not true either. There ain't anything interesting about being an official.' Wang Yuyan said: 'So what do you wanna do? Could it be

that you, you're just like my biao-ge, day and night wanting to be an emperor?' Duan Yu asked in surprise: 'Mr. Murong wants to be an emperor?'

Wang Yuyan blushed because she had unconsciously revealed the secret of her biao-ge. After the battle in the mill, in which she and Duan Yu had gone through trials and tribulations together and narrowly escaped death, she felt that his nature was affable and she could talk about just anything in front of him, but the high ambition to wholeheartedly restore the former state of Yan of Murong Fu after all should not be let out. She said: 'These words were blurted out by me. Please make sure you don't tell anyone else about them. Furthermore, you shouldn't mention them in front of my biao-ge either, or else he might blame me a lot.'

Duan Yu felt grieved in his heart and thought: 'Why are you so worried like this? If your biao-ge wanna blame you, then just let him blame.' But he had to reply: 'Okay, I just don't care about your biao-ge's unimportant businesses. If he was an emperor, fine, if he was a beggar, also fine, I don't care at all.'

Wang Yuyan blushed again, feeling that his tone was sulky, she softly said: 'Mr. Duan, are you angry?'

Since they had become acquainted with each other, Duan Yu had always seen that she totally thought and talked about her biao-ge Mr. Murong. This was the first time she had talked to him sincerely with gentle words like this therefore he could not help but feel elated and burst with joy, almost falling down from the saddle. He hastily sat stably, smiled and said: 'No, no. What am I angry about? Miss Wang, all my life, I will never ever be angry with you.'

Wang Yuyan devoted all of her affections to her biao-ge. Even though Duan Yu had disregarded his own life to save her, she only felt grateful for his kindness and admired his heroic and righteous heart. At this moment, hearing him saying 'all my life, I will never ever be angry with you' in an

extremely sincere manner, just like taking an oath, she suddenly realized: 'He... he... Is he confessing his affection for me?' She could not help feeling ashamed to the extent that all of her face became very red. She slowly bowed her head and softly said: 'You're not angry, then that's good.'

Duan Yu was delighted, for the moment he did not know what to say. After a while, he said: 'I don't want anything. I only hope it'd be like this forever. This can make me perfectly satisfied. I have no other demand.' The words 'it'd be like this forever' only meant riding two horses side by side with her.

Wang Yuyan did not like to hear him talk like that again, her pretty face slightly darkened, she said solemnly: 'Mr. Duan, your great kindness of saving my life today, I will never forget. But my heart.. my heart has long belonged to another person. I hope you'll talk with politeness so that at some future time we'll still be able to see each other.'

These few sentences hit Duan Yu like an extremely heavy stick, making him see flashes of light fluttering before his eyes and almost pass out.

The meaning of her words could not be clearer: 'My heart has long belonged to Mr. Murong. From now on, you can't say any word of admiration, if not I can't see you again. Don't flatter yourself that because you did me a kindness you can vainly covet me.' These few sentences were not immoderate at all and Duan Yu also already knew her feelings, but this time she personally said them, therefore when he heard her words, the taste was really hard to bear. He took a furtive glance at Wang Yuyan to see her expression. Seeing that she looked solemn, really no different to the jade statue in the stone cave in Dali, he could not help but feel that a catastrophe was about to befall him. He thought: 'Duan Yu ah Duan Yu, you've already met this lady, but her heart has long belonged to another man. In this life, you're destined to suffer all kinds of torments and to be indescribably miserable.'

Two of them kept riding side by side in silence. No one said a word again.

Wang Yuyan thought: 'He's likely being angry, very angry. But I'd better pretend that I don't know about it. If this time I apologized to him, later he'd likely always follow me and say these dubious words. If they reached biaoge, biaoge would definitely be unhappy.' Duan Yu thought: 'If I say a sentence that reveals my feelings for her once more, wouldn't that be frivolous and boring, and be disrespectful to her? From now on, Duan Yu'd rather die than say half of any of these sentences again.' Wang Yuyan thought: 'He doesn't say a sentence and just rides the horse straight forwards, most probably he knows where to go to save A'Zhu and A'Bi.' Duan Yu also thought like this: 'She doesn't say a sentence and just rides the horse straight forwards, most probably she knows where to go to save A'Zhu and A'Bi.'

After going for roughly a meal's time, they arrived at an intersection. Two of them coincidentally said at the same time: 'Turn left or turn right?' After exchanging a questioning look, they asked at the same time again: 'You don't know the way? Alas, I thought that you knew.' After saying those two sentences, both of them found this totally amusing and laughed heartily together. The heavy atmosphere of just a moment ago was swept away.

But they knew nothing about affairs in jianghu, after discussing for a long time, they still could not figure out where they should go to save people. In the end Duan Yu said: 'They captured a large number of the Beggar Society's members. Regardless of whether they have killed them or are still keeping them prisoners, there're always some traces we can look for. We'd better return to the apricot forest to see first then talk later.' Wang Yuyan said: 'Return to the apricot forest? If those Western Xia warriors are still there, wouldn't we hurl ourselves willingly into the net?' Duan Yu said: 'I think after such heavy rain just now they're certainly gone. Okay, you'll wait for me outside of the apricot forest.'

I'll quietly go inside to have a look. If the enemies really are still there, we'll turn around and run away immediately.'

Very soon two of them agreed that Duan Yu would use the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' to rush to A'Zhu and A'Bi, let them sniff that bottle of the stinking antidote, then after the detoxification think of a way to save them.

After identifying the way, two of them made the horses run very fast, in a short time they already arrived at the outside of the forest. They got off the horses and tied them to an apricot tree. Duan Yu held the porcelain bottle in his hand and walked on tiptoe into the forest.

There was full of mud inside the forest, the underbrush was still soaking with beads of water. Duan Yu scanned around, and there was not a single soul in sight. He shouted: 'Miss Wang, there's no one here.' Wang Yuyan ran into the forest and said: 'They're really gone. Let's go into Wuxi city to scout for information.' Duan Yu said: 'Very good.' Thinking that he would be able to ride horses side by side with her on another stretch of road, he felt very happy and could not refrain from showing a smiling expression on his face.

Wang Yuyan said in surprise: 'I said something wrong?' Duan Yu hastily said: 'No. Let's go into Wuxi city.' Wang Yuyan said: 'Then why are you smiling?' Duan Yu turned his head away, not daring to look squarely at Wang Yuyan, smiled and said: 'Sometimes I can smile foolishly, you don't need to pay attention to it.' Wang Yuyan found it funny and also let out some laughs. As soon as this happened, Duan Yu could not help laughing loudly ha-ha.

Chapter 18: The Hero had to Exhaust his Tears Because of the Hu-Han Gratitude and Rancor

Fan translation by forgot password [Second Edition]

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(T/n: Hu – old name for non-Han ethnic groups in the north and west of ancient China)

The two of them gently controlled the bridles and let the horses run slowly to Wuxi. After going for several li (t/n: 0.5 km) they suddenly saw a corpse hanging on a roadside pine tree. Judging from the clothes, it was a Western Xia warrior. Going for several more zhang's (t/n: 3.333 m), they saw two corpses of Western Xia warriors lying beside a hillside. The blood on the wounds had not yet been dry. They had died not long ago. Duan Yu said: 'These Western Xia men had met opponents, Miss Wang, you think who killed them?' Wang Yuyan said: 'This man's martial arts are extremely good, killing people just by raising his hands, and without the slightest effort. He's really terrific. Yi, who's there?'

They saw on the wide road there were two horses coming side by side. One of the two people riding the horses was wearing a red gown, and the other was wearing a green gown. They were none other than A'Zhu and A'Bi. Duan Yu was very happy. He shouted: 'Miss A'Zhu, Miss A'Bi, you have escaped from dangers! Good, extremely good! Wonderful!'

The four people rode their horses and gathered. They all felt very happy. A'Zhu said: 'Miss Wang, Mr. Duan, why do you return? I and Sister A'Bi were thinking of going to look for 'you'.' (T/n: you – plural) Duan Yu said: 'We were also looking for you.' As he finished saying he cast a look at Wang Yuyan, thinking that if he could be grouped together with her in 'we', that would really be a great honor. Wang

Yuyan said: 'How did you escape? Have you sniffed that stinking bottle?' A'Zhu smiled and said: 'It's really extremely stinky, Miss, you've also sniffed it? It was also Chief Qiao who saved you?' Wang Yuyan said: 'No. Mr. Duan saved me. You were saved by Chief Qiao?'

Hearing her personally say the sentence 'Mr. Duan saved me', Duan Yu felt buoyant as if he was on cloud nine, after that he felt giddy, and almost fell down from horseback.

A'Zhu said: 'Yes, after I and A'Bi were poisoned, we were in a daze and could not move. Together with the Beggar Society's people, we were tied up by those Western Xia barbarians then put on horseback. After going for a while, it started to rain heavily so they divided the task of finding a rain shelter among themselves then dispersed. Several Western Xia warriors took me and A'Bi into a summerhouse over there to avoid the rain. Only when the heavy rain had stopped did they go out. At that time, in the back there was someone coming on a horse. He was Chief Qiao. Seeing two of us being tied up by Western Xia men he was very surprised. When he hadn't asked any question, I and A'Bi already shouted: 'Chief Qiao, save me!' As soon as those Western Xia warriors heard the two words 'Chief Qiao', they one after another drew their weapons to kill him. As a result, some were hung on a pine tree, some rolled down a hillside, and some fell into a brook.'

Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'That's what happened just now, right?'

A'Zhu said: 'Yes. I said: 'Chief Qiao, I and my sister are poisoned, sorry to trouble you, but could you search for the antidote on the Western Xia barbarians' bodies please?' Chief Qiao ferreted out a small porcelain bottle on the corpse of a Western Xia warrior. Whether it was sweet or stinking, there's no need to talk much about that.'

Wang Yuyan asked: 'Where's Chief Qiao?' A'Zhu said: 'Hearing that the Beggar Society's people had all been poisoned and captured he said he wanted to go save them

and hurriedly left. He also asked about Mr. Duan, looking very concerned.' Duan Yu sighed and said: 'This sworn big brother of mine really has a deep and serious sense of personal loyalty.' A'Zhu said: 'The Beggar Society's people couldn't tell good and bad apart and drove away a good Chief. Now they're suffering from their own actions, serves them right. In my opinion, Chief Qiao doesn't need to save them at all. Just let them taste some misfortunes. See if they'll still rashly expel people?' Duan Yu said: 'My sworn big brother is a faithful man. He'd rather have other people turn their backs on him but he himself won't agree to turn his back on them.'

A'Bi said: 'Miss Wang, where are we going now?' Wang Yuyan said: 'At first I and Mr. Duan discussed that we had to go save you two. Now all the four of us are safe. This really can't be better. The Beggar Society's affairs aren't related to us at all. In my opinion, let's go to Shaolin Monastery to look for your young master, is that okay?' What the two pretty girls A'Zhu and A'Bi cared for the most was also Mr. Murong, hearing her say so they clapped their hands and cheered at the same time. Duan Yu felt very grieved but he calmly said: 'This young master of yours, I really admire him very much, and must meet him by all means. Anyway there's nothing to do so I'll follow you to Shaolin Monastery one time.'

Immediately the four people turned their horses and went towards the north. Wang Yuyan and the two pretty girls A'Zhu and A'Bi continuously smiled and talked about things like how dangerous it had been in the mill, how Duan Yu had dealt with the enemies, and how Li Yanzong, a Western Xia warrior, had spared their lives and given them the antidote in detail. A'Zhu and A'Bi were surprised ceaselessly.

Whenever the three young girls talked to an interesting part, they chuckled and often turned their heads and looked at Duan Yu. They used their sleeves to cover up their mouths but also did not dare to laugh freely. Duan Yu knew they were talking about his own foolish actions, but thinking that

even though he had acted like a clown, in the end he had protected Wang Yuyan carefully, he could not help feeling both ashamed and somewhat proud; seeing that the three young girls were very close to each other and were treating him as a complete outsider, he thought that at this moment it was already like this, wait until they met Mr. Murong, he himself would naturally have no place to take shelter, Murong Fu would probably be like Bao Butong and would drive himself away without any courtesy. The more he thought the more bored and apathetic he felt.

After going for several li's (t/n: one li = 0.5 km) and passing through a big wood of mulberry trees, they suddenly heard the sounds of two boys crying at the edge of the wood. The four people urged their horses forward and saw that they were two fourteen or fifteen year old little Buddhist novices. Their Buddhist robes were full of bloodstains. One of them was even injured in the forehead. A'Bi softly asked: 'Little monks, who bullied you? Why are you injured?'

The Buddhist novice who was not injured in the forehead cried and said: 'There were lots and lots of foreign villains coming to the temple. They killed our master and chased the two of us away.' When the four people heard the two words 'foreign villains', they all looked at each other and thought: 'Are they those Western Xia men?' A'Zhu asked: 'Where's your temple? Who are the foreign villains?' That little Buddhist novice said: 'We're from Tianning Temple, over there...' As he finished saying he pointed to the northeast and said again: 'Those foreigners had captured more than one hundred beggars and went into the temple to avoid the rain. They demanded wine and meat and also wanted to kill fowls and cattle. Our master said that was a sin and did not let them kill the cattle in the temple. They then killed our master and more than ten apprentice brothers in the temple, boohoo, boohoo.' A'Zhu asked: 'Have they gone?' The little Buddhist novice pointed to the wisp of kitchen smoke that was rising and waving in the wind

behind the mulberry wood and said: 'They're cooking cattle meat. What a sin. Bodhisattva bless, please throw these foreigners into the Avici Hell.' A'Zhu said: 'You should quickly run a little far away from here. If you two get caught by those foreigners, they'll butcher and eat you.' Frightened, the two little Buddhist novices staggered away.

Duan Yu disapproved of that and said: 'The two of them already have no way out. Sister A'Zhu, why did you need to threaten them?' A'Zhu smiled and said: 'This wasn't threatening. What I said was the truth.' A'Bi said: 'The Beggar Society's people have already been kept prisoners in that Tianning Temple but Chief Qiao has pursued in the direction of Wuxi city. He's certainly rushed for nothing.'

A'Zhu suddenly had an odd idea and said: 'Miss Wang, I wanna disguise myself as Chief Qiao and sneak in the temple, then throw that stinking bottle for the beggars to sniff. After they've escaped from danger, they'll sure feel very grateful to Chief Qiao.' Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'Chief Qiao is big in stature and is a tall muscular man. How can you disguise yourself as him?' A'Zhu smiled and said: 'The harder it gets, the more obvious A'Zhu's skills are.' Wang Yuyan smiled and said: 'You can make yourself look like Chief Qiao, but you can't immitate his unmatched extraordinary skills. There're full of Western Xia's First-class Hall's experts in Tianning Temple, how can you come and go freely? In my opinion, disguising yourself as a cook or an old peasant woman who sells vegetables would make it a bit easier to sneak in.' A'Zhu said: 'You want me to disguise as an old peasant woman. There's nothing interesting about it. I'm not going.'

Wang Yuyan looked at Duan Yu, wanting to say something but not being able to say it. Duan Yu asked: 'Miss, what do you wanna say?' Wang Yuyan said: 'I just wanted to ask you to disguise as a person, and go with A'Zhu to Tianning Temple, but after considering I find it inappropriate.' Duan Yu said: 'Who do you want me to disguise as?' Wang Yuyan

said: 'The brave men of the Beggar Society have a very suspicious mind. They've wrongly accused my biao-ge and Chief Qiao of colluding with each other and killing their Vice-Chief Ma. If... if... my biao-ge and Chief Qiao free them from difficult situations, then they won't blindly suspect anymore.' Duan Yu felt very sad and said: 'You want me to disguise as your biao-ge?' The white face of Wang Yuyan reddened. She said: 'The enemies in Tianning Temple are very strong so it'll be very dangerous for you two to go like this. Not going is still better.'

Duan Yu thought: 'I'll do whatever you want me to do. Even if my body is ground to dust I won't hesitate.' Suddenly he also thought: 'When I've disguised as her biao-ge, maybe her manner towards me will be a bit different. It'll also be good to conveniently enjoy her tenderness in a short while.' Thinking to here, he could not help feeling very excited and said: 'What's so dangerous about it? Running away is exactly my speciality.'

Wang Yuyan said: 'I already said it was inappropriate. My biao-ge kills the enemies as easily as turning his hand over, and has never run away.' As soon as Duan Yu heard that, he felt a stream of cold air running straight down from the top of his head. He thought: 'Your biao-ge is a great hero and a great person of exceptional abilities. I'm just not suitable to disguise as him. If I imitate him and make a fool of myself in front of other people, that'll certainly desecrate his reputation.' Seeing that he was being in low spirits, A'Bi said to console him: 'The enemies outnumber us so it's urgent that we temporarily step aside. We only wanna save people, and not to become well-known by competing in martial arts.'

A'Zhu's pair of clever eyes looked at Duan Yu from the head to the feet to size him up. After quite a while she nodded and said: 'Mr. Duan, it's really quite hard for you to disguise as our young master. Luckily, the Beggar Society's people have never known our young master, so we only need a person that generally looks and sounds like him.'

Duan Yu said: 'Your skills are great, it's suitable for you to disguise as Chief Qiao. Otherwise, because Chief Qiao was the man that the Beggar Society's people met daily, if there's a little bit of flaw, our true identities will immediately be exposed.' A'Zhu smiled and said: 'Chief Qiao is a stately man but it's easy for me to disguise as him. Our young master is almost the same as you in stature, his age is also not older than yours too much, both of you are young masters of influential families and like to study, but if we want you to give up your true appearance and change into a Mr. Murong, that's really very hard.'

Duan Yu sighed and said: 'Mr. Murong is a phoenix or dragon among people, how can other people imitate him perfectly (Duan Yu's words are 邯郸学步 – learn to walk the Handan style – taken from 'Zhuangzi – Autumn Water')? I think it'd still be better if in disguise I don't look very similar to him, otherwise when I run away, wouldn't that damage Mr. Murong's distinct and good reputation?'

Wang Yuyan blushed and said in a low voice: 'Mr. Duan, I made a slip of the tongue, are you still angry with me?' Duan Yu hastily said: 'No, no, how do I dare to be angry with you?'

Wang Yuyan gave a charming smile and said: 'Sister A'Zhu, where're you two going to disguise?' A'Zhu said: 'To able to buy the things for application we gotta go to a small town.'

The four people turned their horses and went westward. After going for seven or eight li's, they arrived in a small town called Ma Lang Qiao. That town was very small and did not have any inn. A'Zhu came up with an idea. She hired a boat and anchored it in the middle of a river. After that she went buy clothes and necessary things, and disguised on the boat. In Jiangnan, there were small rivers everywhere, and there were a lot of boats, no less than the livestock of the North.

She helped Duan Yu change clothes and made up for him first, letting him hold a folding fan in his right hand, wear a

blue robe and wear a ring on his right finger. A'Zhu said: 'Our young master wears a Han-dynasty jade ring, but where to buy it here? Use Qingtian stone to imitate is also okay.' Duan Yu could only force a smile and thought: 'Murong Fu is a precious jade item. I'm a lowly stone. In the viewpoints of these three young girls, the respective positions of the two of us are also like that.' A'Zhu spread flour on his face, made his nose look higher, and made his cheeks look rather fuller. Then she took a pen and altered his eyebrows and the edge of his eyes. After disguising Duan Yu, she smiled to Wang Yuyan: 'Miss Wang, do you think there's still any dissimilarity?'

Wang Yuyan did not answer and only looked at him in a trance. Her eyes were filled with affectionate feelings. Obviously she was smitten and her mind was wandering high in the air.

As soon as seeing this infatuated look of hers, Duan Yu could not help feeling as if he was floating. But he immediately thought: 'She's looking at Murong Fu and not looking at Duan Yu at all.' He also thought: 'I wonder how handsome that Murong Fu guy is. How can he be one hundred times better-looking than me? It's a pity I can't see myself.' For a while he felt happy, then for another while he felt sad.

The two people looked at each other, thoughts surging in their respective minds. They did not know that A'Zhu and A'Bi had already gone to the back of the cabin to disguise themselves.

After a good while, they suddenly heard the husky voice of a man: 'Ah, so you're here, it was so painful for your big brother to find you.' Frightened, Duan Yu raised his head and saw the person who had just said was Qiao Feng. He could not help feeling very happy and said: 'Big Brother, it's you, this's very good. We're about to disguise as you to go save people, now you've personally come here, Sister A'Zhu doesn't need to disguise anymore.'

Qiao Feng said: 'The Beggar Society's people have expelled me from the Society, whether they're dead or alive, I don't care. Good Brother, come here, come here, let's disembark and go for a drink. We'll drink twenty bowls of wine.' Duan Yu hastily said: 'Big Brother, the Beggar Society's brave men are all your former good brothers, can you please still go save them?' Qiao Feng angrily said: 'What does a bookworm like you know? Come here. Go for a drink with me!' As he finished saying he grabbed Duan Yu's hand. Duan Yu had no choice but to say: 'Okay, I'll go for a drink with you first. After drinking wine we'll save people!'

Qiao Feng suddenly giggled in a lovely manner, his laughs sounded clear and graceful. It was really surprising that a big and tall man could be uttering this kind of girlish laugh. Duan Yu was startled but he immediately understood, smiled and said: 'Sister A'Zhu, your disguising skills are really extremely fantastic. Even the voice and words are imitated so well like this.'

A'Zhu changed to Qiao Feng's voice and said: 'Good Brother, let's go. Make sure you bring that stinking bottle.' She turned towards Wang Yuyan and A'Bi and said: 'The two ladies had better wait here.' As she finished saying she held Duan Yu's hand and strode onshore. No one knew what she had applied to her hand. It was a delicate small white hand, yet when held out, it unexpectedly looked swarthy. Even though it was smaller than Qiao Feng's hand, in short periods of time it was still hard for other people to distinguish.

Wang Yuyan looked at the back of Duan Yu. She only thought: 'If he really was biaoage, that'd be so good. Biaoage, at this moment are you also thinking about me?'

A'Zhu and Duan Yu rode their horses towards Tianning Temple. When they were about five li's away from the temple, fearing that the Western Xia warriors in the temple could hear the hoofbeats, they tied the horses in the cattle stall of a farmhouse and went forwards on foot.

A'Zhu said: 'Brother Murong, after arriving at the temple, I'll talk big, brag and terrify them, you'll seize the opportunity to remove the poison in the Beggar Society's people with the stinking bottle.' She said these few sentences in a deep gruff voice, just like the way Qiao Feng spoke. Duan Yu smiled and replied.

The two people strode to the outside of Tianning Temple. They only saw more than ten Western Xia warriors standing at the gate of the temple, holding long sabers in their hands and looking very fierce. When A'Zhu and Duan Yu saw that, they got nervous and could not help feeling terrified. A'Zhu said in a low voice: 'Mr. Duan, after a while you must pull me and run away at high speed, otherwise if they wanna find and challenge me in martial arts, that can be hard to handle.' Duan Yu said: 'Okay.' But he said this word in a trembling voice. In fact, he also felt extremely scared.

While the two people were discussing in a low voice and sticking their heads out and looking around, a Western Xia warrior at the gate already saw them and shouted loudly: 'Two bastards standing over there, it's not nice to be sneaky, are you spies?' As he was shouting, four other warriors rushed out.

A'Zhu had no alternative but to hold forth her chest and stride forwards. She said in a rough voice: 'Quickly inform your General that Qiao Feng of the Beggar Society and Murong Fu of Jiangnan come to pay General He Lian of Western Xia a visit.'

The head warrior was astonished when he heard that. He hastily cupped his fist in his hand, bowed and said: 'So it's Chief Qiao of the Beggar Society visiting. Please pardon us for being disrespectful. I will report right away.' He immediately turned around and quickly stepped inside the temple. The rest respectfully dangled their hands and stood to the sides.

Before long, sounds of bugles were heard, the gate was opened wide. The Hall Master of First-class Hall of Western

Xia He Lian Tie Shu led the experts like Nu Erhai out to welcome. Ye Erniang, South Sea Divine Alligator and Yun Zhonghe were also among them. Duan Yu lowered his head and did not dare to look directly at them, his heart pounding.

He Lian Tie Shu said: 'I have long admired the great reputation of 'Murong of Gusu' with the 'Paying Him Back Using His Own Methods' technique. Today, being able to meet the worthy, I felt honored, ah, really honored.' As he finished saying he cupped his fist in his hand to Duan Yu in salute. Because 'First-class Hall' of Western Xia and the Beggar Society had become the enemies of each other, he thought there was no need to act polite towards Qiao Feng.

Duan Yu hastily returned the salute and said: 'General He Lian's reputation has reached the edges of the seas so I have long been looking forward to meeting the heroes and great men of First-class Hall. Today our arrival is very sudden, hopefully you'll be magnanimous enough to forgive this.' He was already very good at saying these fanciful polite words therefore they sounded grandiose and did not have any flaw.

He Lian Tie Shu said: 'I've often heard people in wulin say: 'North Qiao Feng, South Murong', and when talking about heroes of Central Plains, they choose the two of you as the leading figures. Today the two of you visit here at the same time, how fortunate! Please, please.' He then bent his body and invited the two people to enter the main hall of the temple.

A'Zhu and Duan Yu put on a bold face and went side by side with He Lian Tie Shu. Duan Yu thought: 'Judging from the words and manner of this Western Xia general, it seems he respects Mr. Murong more than he respects my Big Brother Qiao. Could it be that this Murong Fu guy's martial arts and personality are one level above Big Brother Qiao's? As I see, this's improbable, improbable.'

Suddenly there was a strange voice: 'Improbable, improbable.' Startled, Duan Yu turned his head and looked

at that person. It was South Sea Divine Alligator. He was squinting at Duan Yu at a slant with a pair of eyes which were as small as beans, and only shook his head. Duan Yu's heart palpitated. He thought: 'Terrible, terrible! Perhaps I was recognized by him.' He heard South Sea Divine Alligator say: 'Looks like you have less than three taels of bones (t/n: in ancient China, one tael ~ 38 g), what the heck are you capable of? Hey, I ask you. They say you can 'Pay Him Back Using His Own Methods', I, Yue Laoer (t/n: Yue the Second), certainly don't believe so.' Duan Yu immediately felt relieved: 'So he doesn't recognize me at all.' He heard South Sea Divine Alligator say again: 'I don't need you to show your skills either. I only ask you, do you know what Yue Laoer's special skills are? What fvcking skills you'll use to deal with me to be regarded as fvcking 'Paying Your Father Back Using Your Father's Own Methods'?' Saying to here he stood with arms akimbo, looking arrogant.

He Lian Tie Shu at first had wanted to talk to stop him, but he changed his mind. Murong Fu had a great reputation, but whether the name matched the reality, there was no harm in checking it out through this crazy South Sea Divine Alligator. Therefore at that moment he did not interrupt him at all.

While talking, they had already entered the main hall. He Lian Tie Shu invited Duan Yu to sit at the top but Duan Yu gave the top position up to A'Zhu.

South Sea Divine Alligator said loudly: 'Hey, Mr. Murong, you say, what's my best skill?' Duan Yu smiled and thought: 'If other people ask me, I really won't be able to answer. But you asked me, that's a lucky coincidence.' He instantly opened his folding fan, flapped it gently several times and said: 'South Sea Divine Alligator Yue Laosan (t/n: Yue the Third), originally your best skill was twisting off other people's necks in a clack sound. In recent years your skills have improved. At the moment the martial arts that you're most pleased with are the Alligator-Tailed Whip and the

Alligator-Mouthed Scissors. To deal with you, naturally I'll use the Alligator-Tailed Whip and the Alligator-Mouthed Scissors.'

He mentioned the names of the Alligator-Tailed Whip and the Alligator-Mouthed Scissors in one go. Certainly South Sea Divine Alligator was so surprised that his jaw dropped. Even Ye Erniang and Yun Zhonghe were also extremely surprised. South Sea Divine Alligator had just practiced these two weapons recently and had never put them to use in front of other people. He had only used them once when fighting Yun Zhonghe atop Mt. Wuliang in Dali. At that time, no one else besides Mu Wanqing had seen the weapons. But they could never have thought Mu Wanqing had already told this fake Mr. Murong of the present about that from beginning to end.

South Sea Divine Alligator tilted his head and looked carefully at Duan Yu. Even though he was ferocious and ruthless, he admired heroes and brave men. After a while, he gave a thumb up and said: 'Good skill!' Duan Yu laughed and said: 'That's a laugh.' South Sea Divine Alligator thought: 'He could mention even the weapons I've mastered recently, there's no need to ask him about my remaining martial arts. Too bad big brother is not here, otherwise he'd put him to the test. Ah, I got it!' He said loudly: 'Mr. Murong, you can use my martial arts, there's nothing strange and rare about that, but if my master comes here, you sure won't know his martial arts.' Duan Yu smiled and said: 'Who's your master? What extraordinary skills does he have?' South Sea Divine Alligator laughed and said boastfully: 'Needless to say, the master who first taught me martial arts passed away long ago. But the skills of my newly recognized master are no small matter. Let's not talk about the other things, just the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' alone, I believe no second person in the world knows.'

Duan Yu muttered: 'The 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps', hum, that's truly an amazing technique. Who would have

expected Mr. Duan of Dali to accept you as his disciple? But I somewhat don't believe this.' South Sea Divine Alligator hastily said: 'Why do I need to fool you? A lot of people here personally heard Mr. Duan call me disciple.' Duan Yu laughed up his sleeve: 'At first you'd rather die than agree to call me master, but now you fear that I don't recognize you as disciple.' He then said: 'Hum, if so, you most probably have already acquired your master's unique skill? Congrats! Congrats!'

South Sea Divine Alligator shook his head continuously and said: 'I haven't, I haven't! You claim that you know every martial arts technique in the world. If you can walk three steps of the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps', Yue Laoer will be convinced.'

Duan Yu smiled and said: 'Though the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' is hard, I've also already learned several steps. Master Yue, come here and try to catch me.' As he finished saying, his robe fluttered, he went to and stood in the middle of the main hall.

The Western Xia people had never heard of the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' technique, hearing South Sea Divine Alligator say that it was extremely mysterious and fantastic like this, they all hoped to increase their knowledge. They immediately split up and stood in the four corners of the main hall to see how Duan Yu would perform.

South Sea Divine Alligator let out a fierce roar and reached out his left hand. His right hand passed below his left palm to grab Duan Yu. Duan Yu took two steps obliquely then backed off by half a step. His body was like the wind stirring lotus leaves, gently dodging it. A 'pu' sound was heard, South Sea Divine Alligator had been too late to withdraw his force and his five right fingers had stuck into a column in the main hall by several cun's (1 cun = 3.333 cm). Seeing that his internal energy was this good, all the bystanders went pale. Because the first attack had missed, South Sea Divine Alligator roared more fiercely and jumped

up then struck down from the air. Duan Yu did not pay any attention to that, and only concerned himself with the Eight Diagrams-based footwork that he was using to walk freely and comfortably. South Sea Divine Alligator sped up his attacks and roared more and more loudly, looking totally like a ferocious beast.

When Duan Yu caught a glimpse of that ferocious face, his heart skipped a beat. He hastily turned his head away, took out from his sleeve a towel, blindfolded himself and said: 'Even if I'm blindfolded, you still won't be able to catch me.'

South Sea Divine Alligator's palms danced in the air and fiercely attacked Duan Yu, but they always missed his body by small distances. The bystanders all felt scared for Duan Yu, their palms excreting cold sweats. A'Zhu cared about Duan Yu therefore she was filled with even more apprehension. Suddenly she shouted loudly in a rough voice: 'South Sea Divine Alligator, how is Mr. Murong's 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' compared to your master's?'

South Sea Divine Alligator was startled. All the energy in his chest was instantly discharged. He stopped moving and said: 'Excellent, excellent! You can walk this strange footwork while having your eyes encased. I'm afraid even my master couldn't do so. Okay! Murong of Gusu deserves his reputation. I, South Sea Divine Alligator, have respect for you.'

Duan Yu pulled off the towel on his eyes and returned to his seat. Immediately there was a round of thunderous applause in the main hall.

Waiting until the two people had settled into their seats, He Lian Tie Shu raised his teacup and said: 'Please have some tea. As the two heroes are visiting us, I'm wondering what you have to instruct us.'

A'Zhu said: 'Some brothers of my Society somehow offended General. I heard that General sent experts to use

high-level martial arts to capture and take them here. May I be bold to request that General release them?' She specially stressed the words 'sent experts to use high-level martial arts to capture and take them here' to ridicule the Western Xia people for using the despicable method of poisoning to capture people.

He Lian Tie Shu smiled and said: 'That's not wrong. Just now Mr. Murong displayed his abilities. Sure enough, he deserves his reputation. Chief Qiao and Mr. Murong are equally famous, so you too need to show off your skills to everyone and make us Western Xia people sincerely admire. Only then will we release every brave man of your Society.'

A'Zhu was very worried and thought: 'If I imitate Chief Qiao's skills, wouldn't this immediately be exposed?' While trying to find a pretext to decline suddenly she felt achy and weak in her limbs, which was the same as when she had been poisoned with the poisonous gas in the evening of the previous day. She could not help feeling very frightened: 'How terrible, who would've expected these Western Xia villains to use the old trick again even at this moment? What should I do?'

Duan Yu was immune to harmful substances therefore he did not felt anything. Seeing that A'Zhu was weak and being paralyzed on her chair, he knew that she was being affected by the poisonous gas again. He hastily took out from his bosom that stinking bottle, removed its stopper and placed it at the tip of her nose. A'Zhu took some deep sniffs. Because she was not seriously poisoned, the numbness in her limbs quickly disappeared. She stretched out her hand to hold the bottle and kept sniffing nonstop. She found it strange as to why the enemies had not yet started to interfere. When looking at those Western Xia warriors, she only saw that every one of them was weak and being paralyzed on their chair. They were not budging at all and were only moving their eyeballs around chaotically.

Duan Yu said: 'How strange, these people get caught in their own trap. Could it be that they poisoned then were poisoned by themselves?' A'Zhu went to He Lian Tie Shu and pushed him.

The body of the general was immediately bent and he sat on the chair in a sloping posture. He was really poisoned. But he could still say, therefore he shouted: 'Hey, who used the 'Sad Weak Clear Wind' without permission? Quickly take the antidote here, quickly take the antidote here!' He shouted several times, but because all of his subordinates were being weak, they only said: 'Sir, subordinate can't move.' Nu Erhai said: 'There must be an infiltrator, if not, how can they know the complicated using method of this 'Sad Weak Clear Wind'?' He Lian Tie Shu angrily said: 'Correct! Who? You quickly investigate to clear this up then smash him to ten thousand pieces for me.' Nu Erhai said: 'Yes, sir! But in the current situation, we must get the antidote first.' He Lian Tie Shu said: 'That's right. You go and take the antidote here.'

Nu Erhai wrinkled his eyebrows, looked askance at the porcelain bottle in A'Zhu's hand and said: 'Chief Qiao, sorry to trouble you, but could you please let us sniff the antidote in this bottle? Our General will definitely reward you generously.'

A'Zhu laughed and said: 'Who comes here to get your General's generous rewards? I wanna urgently go rescue our Society's brothers.'

Nu Erhai said again: 'Mr. Murong, there's also a vial on my body. Could you please take it out, remove the stopper and let me sniff it a bit?'

Duan Yu reached into his bosom and fished out a vial. It really was the antidote. He laughed and said: 'I've taken out the antidote but I won't let you sniff.' Then he went alongside A'Zhu to the back hall. When they pushed open the door of the west room they saw that it was crammed

with people, all of whom were the Beggar Society's members who had been captured.

As soon as A'Zhu went in, Elder Wu called out: 'Chief Qiao, it's you. Thank heavens.' A'Zhu took the antidote for him to sniff and said: 'This is the antidote. You go remove the poison in the bodies of all brothers one by one.' Elder Wu was very happy. He waited until his limbs could move to detoxify Elder Song. Duan Yu then used the antidote of Nu Erhai to detoxify Elder Xu.

A'Zhu said: 'The Beggar Society has a lot of people. If detoxifying one by one like this, when will it finish? Elder Wu, you go search the bodies of those Western Xia people to see if they still have the antidote.'

Elder Wu said: 'Yes!' then trotted towards the main hall. Swear words, yells, and pops of beating suddenly could be heard from the main hall. Obviously on the one hand Elder Wu was searching for the antidote, and on the other hand he was beating them to vent his anger. Before long he returned, carrying six small porcelain bottles with both hands, smiled and said: 'I focused on searching the barbarians with flashy expensive clothes. As expected, the ones with nice clothes had the antidote on their bodies. Ha-ha, those dudes have been miserable.' Duan Yu laughed and said: 'Why?' Elder Wu laughed and said: 'I gave each of them two slaps in the mouth. With those who had the antidote, I specially used some more force.'

Suddenly he remembered that he had never seen Duan Yu, therefore he asked: 'Brother, what, may I ask, is your name? Thank you very much for helping us.' Duan Yu said: 'My compound surname is Murong. I came to help too late, putting everybody to great inconvenience for a short while. This is my fault, my fault.'

Hearing that this man in front of them is the famous 'Murong of Gusu', the Beggar Society's people all were extremely astonished.

Elder Song said: 'We've been blinded and wrongly accused Mr. Murong of killing Vice-Chief Ma. Today, if he and Chief Qiao hadn't saved us, everybody would have fallen into the hands of these Western Xia bastards. If that happened, would we still be able to have a good end?' Elder Wu also said: 'Chief Qiao, a senior doesn't mind juniors' faults, it'd be better if you return to be our Chief.'

Quan Guanqing said coldly: 'Master Qiao and Mr. Murong really are intimate friends.' Calling Qiao Feng as 'Master Qiao' instead of 'Chief Qiao', certainly he no longer recognized him as the Chief. Moreover he had said that he and Mr. Murong really were intimate friends, which was a very dangerous sentence. The Beggar Society's people had been suspecting Qiao Feng of making use of Murong Fu to eliminate Ma Dayuan but Qiao Feng had always denied that he and Murong Fu knew each other. Today the two of them had gone to Tianning Temple together. They had also spoken to and laughed with each other, looking fairly close. Obviously this was not the first time they had met.

A'Zhu thought that these people all were old acquaintances of Qiao Feng, if she dragged this situation out a little longer, they would surely recognize her flaws. Therefore she said: 'It won't be late to slowly discuss the important affairs of the Society. I go see those Western Xia bastards.' As she finished saying she walked towards the main hall. Soon afterward Duan Yu followed her.

When the two people had arrived at the main hall, they heard He Lian Tie Shu shouting abuse: 'Quickly find out the name of this Western Xia bastard. After returning, search and confiscate his house, kill all the males and females, old people and young people in his family, not sparing even a single fowl or dog. Fvck him, he's a Western Xia man, why did he help strangers by stealing my 'Sad Weak Clear Wind' and spreading it carelessly?' Duan Yu was surprised and thought: 'Who's the Western Xia man he was cursing?' He noticed that after He Lian Tie Shu let out a cursing sentence,

Nu Erhai would reply with a sentence. He Lian said again: 'He wrote these eight characters on the wall, isn't it obvious that he wanna ridicule us?'

Duan Yu and A'Zhu raised their heads and saw four rows of words which looked like flying dragons and dancing snakes written on the whitewashed wall:

'Paying Him Back, Using His Own Methods, Narcotic Poisonous Wind, I Fully Return To You.'

[□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□]

The ink strokes were still dripping wet. Obviously the writer of these words had left not long ago.

Duan Yu uttered an 'Ah' sound and said: 'This... Ah... Was it Mr. Murong who wrote this?' A'Zhu said in a low voice: 'Don't forget you're Mr. Murong. Our young master can write different styles of calligraphy, I can't recognize if these words were written by him.'

Duan Yu turned towards Nu Erhai and asked: 'Who wrote this?'

Nu Erhai did not answer and secretly felt anxious, not knowing how the Beggar Society's people would handle them. After capturing the Beggar Society's people, they themselves had done just about everything, including beating and insulting, therefore they only needed to 'Pay Him Back, Using His Own Methods', that would already be very hard to bear.

Seeing that the Beggar Society's people were coming to the main hall in succession, A'Zhu said in a low voice: 'The important business has been done, let's go!' She then said loudly: 'I have another important business and must go handle it with Mr. Murong. See you later.' As she finished saying she trotted out of the hall. The people like Elder Wu screamed out: 'Chief, please wait, Chief, please wait.' A'Zhu did not dare to stay there anymore. She and Duan Yu went faster and faster. The Beggar Society's people had always revered Qiao Feng therefore no one dared to go forwards to stop them.

After the two people had gone for about a li (0.5 km), A'Zhu laughed and said: 'Mr. Duan, it was really a lucky coincidence. That hideous disciple of yours by chance wanted you to perform the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps' technique. He also said that you were even better than his master.' Duan Yu let out an 'Um' sound. A'Zhu continued: 'I wonder who released the narcotic drug? That Western Xia general kept saying that there was an infiltrator. I think it was probably Western Xia men themselves who did that.'

Duan Yu suddenly recalled a person and said: 'Could it be Li Yanzong, the Western Xia warrior we met in the mill?' A'Zhu had never seen Li Yanzong therefore she was unable to reply. She only said: 'Let's go and talk to Miss Wang, asking her to consider it in detail.'

While they were going, they heard hoofbeats. On the main road a person was galloping towards them. From afar Duan Yu saw that it was no one other than Qiao Feng. He happily said: 'He's Big Brother Qiao!' When he was about to call out, A'Zhu hastily pulled his sleeve and said: 'Don't shout. The real person has arrived!' then turned her body away. Duan Yu immediately understood: 'A'Zhu is disguising as Big Brother Qiao, it wouldn't be very nice if she's seen by him.' Before long, Qiao Feng had already come close. Duan Yu did not dare to face him directly and thought: 'When Big Brother Qiao meets the brave men of the Beggar Society, the truth will immediately come out. I wonder if he will blame A'Zhu for playing a trick like this or not.'

After saving A'Zhu and A'Bi, Qiao Feng had known that the Beggar Society's brothers had been captured by Western Xia men. Feeling very anxious, he had been searching for them all over the place. But unlike in the North where there were only roads, in Jiangnan, there were paddy fields and mulberry groves everywhere, and waterways and land routes also intersected each other. Qiao Feng had searched for a very long time, and with great difficulty he had run into the two little Buddhist novices of Tianning Temple. He had asked

them clearly about the direction, only then had he rushed for Tianning Temple. When he saw the vigorous expression and the handsome appearance of Duan Yu he thought: 'This young nobleman and my brother Duan Yu look equally bright.' As A'Zhu had already turned her body away he did not pay attention to her. Worrying about the Beggar Society's brothers, he spurred the horse on to full speed and swept past them.

When he arrived at Tianning Temple, he saw more than ten disciples of the Beggar Society binding the Western Xia warriors and leading them out from the inside of the temple. Qiao Feng was very happy and thought: 'So the Beggar Society's brothers have turned the losing situation around and won instead.'

Seeing that Qiao Feng had gone then returned, the beggars one after another moved forwards to welcome him and said: 'Chief, how to deal with these barbarians? Please give us instructions.' Qiao Feng said: 'I'm already no longer a member of the Beggar Society, don't mention the word 'Chief' again. Was anyone injured?'

After the people like Elder Xu were informed, they all quickly ran out to welcome him. When they saw Qiao Feng, their faces either had an ashamed expression or lit up with happiness. Elder Song said loudly: 'Chief, yesterday in the apricot forest, our Society's spy in Western Xia sent back an urgent piece of military information. Elder Xu himself decided not to let you see, do you know what it was? Elder Xu, quickly take it out for Chief to see.' His words sounded rather rude.

With an ashamed look on his face, Elder Xu took out a small paper ball that originally had been concealed in a wax ball and sighed: 'I was wrong.' Then he held it out to Qiao Feng.

Qiao Feng shook his head and did not receive it. Elder Song forced his way forwards, grabbed and opened that thin crinkled paper then read loudly:

‘Report to Chief: Subordinate has found out that General He Lian Tie Shu of Western Xia has led the experts of First-class Hall to Central Plains to deal with our Society. They have a dangerous type of poisonous gas. When released it’s totally odorless and make people involuntarily unable to move. When we meet them, make sure we plug up our nostrils first, or defeat their leader first to snatch the awfully stinking antidote. Otherwise it’d be extremely unsafe. Urgent! Urgent! Subordinate Yi Dabiao of the Great Faith branch urgently reports.’

As Elder Song finished reading, he and such people as Elder Wu and Elder Xi glowered at Elder Xu simultaneously. Bai Shijing said: ‘This urgent report by Brother Yi Dabiao arrived in time. Too bad we didn’t open and read it in time. Fortunately all brothers only suffered a terror and no one was injured. Chief, we all apologize. Alas, really, needless to say, you’re very noble and righteous.’

Elder Wu said: ‘Chief, when you just left, everyone was instantly caught in this situation. If you and Mr. Murong hadn’t come and rescued us in time, the whole Beggar Society would’ve been wiped out. If you don’t return to take charge of important matters and to be our Chief, that won’t work.’ Qiao Feng said in surprise: ‘What Mr. Murong?’ Elder Wu said: ‘People like Quan Guanqing talk nonsense, please don’t listen to him. What’s wrong with making friends? I believe that you and Mr. Murong have only known each other since today.’ Qiao Feng said: ‘Mr. Murong? Do you mean Murong Fu? I’ve never seen him.’

Elder Xu and the four Elders Song, Xi, Chen and Wu looked blankly at each other. All of them were nonplussed and thought: ‘Just a moment ago you and Mr. Murong hand in hand came in and detoxified everyone. Why at this moment do you suddenly say you don’t know Mr. Murong?’ After thinking for a short while Elder Xi suddenly understood and said: ‘Ah, that’s right, just now that young master claimed that his compound surname was Murong, but he

didn't say that he was Murong Fu at all. There're countless people with the compound surname 'Murong' in the world, what's so strange about that?' Elder Chen said: 'But he himself wrote 'Paying Him Back, Using His Own Methods' on the wall. If he wasn't Murong Fu then who was he?'

All of a sudden there was a strange voice: 'That bratty young master could use all kinds of martial arts, moreover his skills were even better than those of the original owners, how come he wasn't Murong Fu? Of course it was him! It was definitely him!' Everyone looked at the speaker and saw that he had eyes which looked like those of a rat, a short beard and a sallow face. He was South Sea Divine Alligator. After being poisoned he had been tied up, but he could not help interrupting and putting in his opinion.

Qiao Feng asked in surprise: 'So Murong Fu came here?' South Sea Divine Alligator said furiously: 'You're talking your mother's stinking farts! Just now you and Murong Fu came here hand in hand then played some goddamn stealthy trick, using anesthetic to make your father go numb. You quickly let me go, otherwise, humph! Humph humph...' He uttered several 'humph humph' sounds in succession, but as for what would happen 'otherwise', he could not say it. After pondering, he merely uttered 'humph humph' sounds.

Qiao Feng said: 'I see that you're also an expert in wulin, why are you talking nonsense like this? When did I ever come here? Stuff like I and Murong Fu came here hand in hand is extremely ridiculous.'

South Sea Divine Alligator gasped with anger and shouted: 'Qiao Feng, fvck you Qiao Feng. What a shame that despite being a Chief of the Beggar Society you dare to tell this brazen lie! My big and little fellows, Qiao Feng came here just now, didn't him? Didn't our General invite him to sit at the top and to drink tea?' The Western Xia people all said: 'Yes, Murong Fu performed the 'Wave Treading Exquisite Steps', Qiao Feng stood on a side and applauded, how come this was fake?'

Elder Wu pulled Qiao Feng's sleeve and said in a low voice: 'Chief, straightforward men don't do sneaky things. What happened just now can't be denied.' Qiao Feng forced a smile and said: 'Fourth brother Wu, don't tell me that just a moment ago you also saw me coming here?' Elder Wu passed the small porcelain bottle containing the antidote to him and said: 'Chief, I return the bottle to you, maybe it'll still be useful in the future.' Qiao Feng said: 'Return to me? Why return it to me?' Elder Wu said: 'You gave me this antidote just a moment ago, have you forgotten?' Qiao Feng said: 'What? Fourth brother Wu, you really saw me just now?' Seeing him continuously denying, Elder Wu felt both unhappy and uneasy.

Even though Qiao Feng was smart and capable, how could he guess that someone had disguised as himself and just a short while ago had come to Tianning Temple and rescued everybody? He thought that there was certainly an important conspiracy concealed in this matter. As straightforward people, both Elder Wu and Elder Song definitely could not do anything that was despicable, but the schemer who had been toying with him had dangerous plots. They could have set things up appropriately to make his own conduct and deeds appeared to be absurd and wicked in all respects in everyone's eyes.

Being saved by him, at first everyone in the Beggar Society had felt grateful for that, but now hearing him absolutely denying doing so, they were greatly amazed. Some people thought that for the past several days he had encountered a lot of unforeseen events, as a result his mind was in confusion; some thought that he had really made use of Murong Fu and killed Ma Dayuan, now fearing his evil scheme would be exposed, he bluntly insistently denied that he knew that man with the Murong surname; some thought that he had been conspiring to be the Chief of the Beggar Society again and was setting up some stratagem; there were even more people resolutely believing that he was

exerting himself for Khitan by both opposing Western Xia and causing trouble to Great Song. Everyone had a different guess therefore there were all kinds of expressions on the faces of the beggars such as sorry, respectful, grieved, scornful and hostile.

Qiao Feng let out a deep sigh and said: 'Everybody has escaped from dangers so Qiao Feng is leaving now.' As he finished saying he cupped his fist in his hand, turned around and got on the horse. Raising the whip, he galloped away.

Suddenly he heard Elder Xu shout: 'Qiao Feng, leave the Dog Beating Stick behind.' Qiao Feng abruptly reined the horse and said: 'The Dog Beating Stick? In the apricot forest didn't I already hand it over?' Elder Xu said: 'We slipped up and was captured so the Dog Beating Stick fell into the hands of the Western Xia bastards. Now we have ransacked everywhere but still can't find it. Most prolly you've taken it.'

Qiao Feng turned his face skywards and let out a stream of laughs, which sounded sorrowful and disappointed, then said loudly: 'I, Qiao Feng, and the Beggar Society no longer have any connection with each other, what do I take the Dog Beating Stick for? Elder Xu, you've overly undervalued me.' He gave the horse a nip with his legs. It immediately galloped towards the north with its four hooves looking like flying.

When Qiao Feng had been a child he had been loved and raised by his parents. Later, he had been taught martial arts by a Shaolin monk Xuan Ku dashi (dashi = great monk, an honorific title for monks), then he had acknowledged Chief Wang of the Beggar Society as his master. When going in jianghu, even though he had experienced a lot of hardships and dangers, his masters and friends had invariably treated him with genuine sincerity. But for the past two days, a storm had suddenly taken place in the world. A Chief who had all along been renowned, illustrious, sincere, benevolent and righteous was inexplicably regarded as a traitor to the

country who harmed the people, and as a shameless untrustworthy scoundrel. He let the horse go aimlessly as it pleased. His mind was extremely confused: 'If I'm really a Khitan, for the past ten years I've killed not just a few Khitan people and ruined not just a few Khitan schemes, how come I'm not a greatly disloyal man? If my parents were really killed by Han people outside of Yanmen Pass, as I've regarded the murder of my parents as master and for the past thirty years called other people father and mother, how come I'm not a greatly unfilial son? Qiao Feng ah Qiao Feng, you're this disloyal and unfilial, how do you dare to live in the world? If Sir Sanhuai isn't my father then I'm certainly not Qiao Feng either? What's my surname? What's the first name that my natural father gave me? Ha-ha, not only am I disloyal and unfilial, but I also don't have a first name and a surname.'

He also had another thought: 'However, maybe all of these are due to a very treacherous arch-villain framing me. I, Qiao Feng, am confidently a dazhangfu (t/n: basically means a man of resolve or success), but I've been manipulated by others to the point that my reputation has totally been lost and can't be redeemed. If I packed up and left my responsibilities at this point because of the temporary indignation and from now on became indifferent to the Beggar Society, wouldn't that make the villain's scheme successful? Hum, all in all, I must investigate and make things clear.'

In his mind he planned, the first step was returning to Mt. Shaoshi in Henan and asking Sir Sanhuai about my own life and origin, the second step would be entering Shaolin Monastery, visiting my first martial arts enshi (kind master) Xuan Ku dashi and begging him to reveal the truth, these two people had always cherished me very much so they definitely would not hold back anything.

After planning like that he did not feel worried anymore. In the past, as the Chief of the Beggar Society, he had been

able to consider the whole country his home when travelling in jianghu. Now, not only could he not go to the branches everywhere for accommodation, in order to avoid causing troubles, wherever he went he did not use roads so that he would not meet former subordinates in the Beggar Society. After going for just two days, the money on his body had been used up therefore he had to sell the horse that he had seized from the Western Xia people for travelling expenses.

One day, he arrived at the foot of Mt. Song then went towards Mt. Shaoshi. This was the place where he had been staying during his boyhood therefore he was already familiar with the scenery everywhere. Because the Beggar Society was the biggest society in jianghu and Shaolin School was the biggest school in wulin, if the Beggar Society's Chief came to Shaolin, this would bring about all kinds of formalities and extravagances and disturb a great deal of people. Hence ever since he had taken up the post of the Beggar Society's Chief, he had never returned here. Every year he had only sent people to respectfully give his parents and enshi food and clothing, and to inquire after them. At this moment, when he was returning to his old land, thinking that his own origin was very enigmatic and that in two or four hours it would be made clear, even though he was a calm and stable man, he could not refrain from getting anxious.

His old home was located beside a mountain slope on the south side of Mt. Shaoshi. Qiao Feng quickly went around the mountain slope. He only saw that there were a straw hat and a teapot put under the big jujube tree beside the vegetable garden. The handle of the teapot had already been broken. Qiao Feng knew that it belonged to his father Qiao Sanhuai. He suddenly felt a burst of warm thoughts in his heart: 'Dad is diligent and thrifty, this broken teapot has been used for several decades but he's still unwilling to throw it away.'

As he looked at the big jujube tree he also recalled that in his childhood every time jujubes had been ripe father had always held his small hand then knocked jujubes from the tree together with him. The red ripe jujubes had been so plump that their skin had been cracked. They had been both sweet and juicy. Ever since he had left his old land, he had never tasted such delicious jujubes again. Qiao Feng thought: 'Even if they aren't my real parents, in this life, it's hard for me to repay this kindness of nurturing. No matter what my real origin is, I definitely won't change what I've addressed them as.'

He went to and stopped before the three-room earthen house, only seeing a bamboo mat on which there were full of vegetables spread for sunning outside of it and a mother hen which was leading a flock of chicks pecking food in the grass. He could not help beaming: 'Tonight mom will surely kill chicken and prepare a meal to treat the son that she hasn't seen for a long time.' He called out: 'Dad! Mom! This son has returned.'

He called a few times but did not hear any reply. He thought: 'Ah, that's right, the two oldsters' ears have been deaf and can't hear.' He pushed the door open and strode into the house. Inside the main room, such things as wooden table, wooden bench, plow, harrow and hoe did not look very different than they had been when he had left home, but he saw no one.

Qiao Feng called several more times: 'Dad! Mom!', but still, he did not hear any reply. He felt a bit surprised and talked to himself: 'Where have they gone?' When he stuck his head in the bedroom, he could not help jumping out of his skin because he saw Qiao Sanhuai and his wife lying motionlessly on the ground.

Qiao Feng hurriedly jumped into the room. First he helped his mother sit up only to find that her breathing had already stopped, but her body was still a little bit warm, obviously she had been dead for less than two hours. Next, when he

carried his father, he noticed the same things. Being both panicky and grieved, Qiao Feng carried the corpse of his father and ran out of the house. After examining it carefully in the sunshine, he discovered that all the ribs in his chest had been broken. It was clear that he had been stricken dead by the palm force of a martial arts expert. He looked at the corpse of his mother again and found that she had died in the same way. Qiao Feng was confused: 'My dad and mom are faithful generous honest peasants. Why could some martial arts expert use such cruel means to murder them? Certainly it was because of me.'

He examined carefully the three rooms inside the house, as well as the area in front of it, the area behind it, and the roof to know what kind of man the murderer was. But the murderer did not leave behind even a single footprint. Qiao Feng's face was covered with tears. The more he thought, the sadder he became. He could not help bursting out crying.

When he had cried for just a short while, suddenly he heard someone say at his back: 'What a pity, what a pity. We've come late by a step.' Qiao Feng immediately turned around and saw four middle-aged monks dressed in clothes of Shaolin Monastery. Even though Qiao Feng had learned martial arts of Shaolin School, Xuan Ku dashi, the person who had taught him martial arts, had come to his house directly every night to teach him, therefore he did not know any monk of Shaolin Monastery. Now he was feeling miserable, hence even though he had seen the strangers, for the moment it was hard for him to hold back his tears.

A rather tall monk with a completely furious look loudly said: 'Qiao Feng, you're really lower than pigs and dogs. Even if Qiao Sanhuai and his wife aren't your real parents, the kindness of bringing you up for more than ten years is no trivial matter. How could you have the heart to murder them?' Qiao Feng sobbed: 'I returned home just a moment ago. Seeing that my parents have been murdered I only

wanna find out who the killer is to revenge my parents. Dashi, how could you say so?' That monk said furiously: 'The cruel heart of Khitan people is hard to change. You've really acted like an animal! You killed your foster parents with your own hands, what a pity we came to help too late. Surnamed Qiao, if you wanna go to Mt. Shaoshi to act wildly, you're still this far short of that.' As he finished saying, he threw a palm attack towards Qiao Feng's chest, creating a 'hu' sound.

When Qiao Feng was about to dodge, he heard the sound of wind gently moving at his back. He knew that someone was launching a sneak attack at the back. Unwilling to fight these Shaolin monks without clear reasons like this, he made a pressing with his left foot and gently leaped out for one zhang (3.333 m). As expected, a kick of another Shaolin monk missed him and hit the air.

Seeing that he had dodged so easily like this, the four Shaolin monks all had an astonished look on their faces. That tall and big monk scolded: 'Your martial arts are good. So what? You think that having killed your foster parents you can hide your origin? Too bad you're a descendant of the evil Khitan race. This has spread in wulin for a long time. Who in jianghu doesn't know about it? Committing this severe betrayal, you've only increased the amount of your sins.' Another monk scolded: 'First you killed Ma Dayuan, next you killed Qiao Sanhuai and his wife, humph humph, how can these scandals be hidden?'

Even though Qiao Feng heard the two monks revile him so, he was only grieved and did not have the slightest feeling of anger. All his life he had faced important matters, decided important doubtful cases and met not just a few difficult affairs, therefore at this moment he was very capable of repressing his anger. He cupped his fist in his hand in salute and said: 'May I ask, what are the religious names of the four dashi's'? Are you eminent monks of Shaolin Monastery?'

A monk with a medium height who had the most pleasant temperament said: 'We all are Shaolin disciples. Alas, your foster father and mother were faithful and generous all their lives, but they ended up being repaid this miserably. Qiao Feng, you Khitan people have acted too savagely.'

Qiao Feng thought: 'They're already unwilling to reveal their religious names. It's no use asking them more. That tall monk said they had come to help too late so they must have come here to help after receiving a message. But who secretly let them know? Who predicted that my parents were going to encounter dangers?' He then said: 'The four of you are charitable and descended from the mountain to save my parents. What a pity you were a tad late...'

That tall monk had a fiery temper. He raised the fist which was as big as an alms bowl (t/n: rice bowls that monks used in old times) and threw a punch at Qiao Feng, making a 'hu' sound. He shouted loudly: 'We let you commit this unfilial thing only because we were a tad late, yet you're still showing your complacency and saying mocking words?'

Qiao Feng knew obviously that the four of them had good intentions because they had immediately come to save his own parents after receiving the message. Hence he was unwilling to fight them, but if he did not subdue them, he would not ever be able to make the truth become clear. He said: 'I appreciate the kindness of the four of you. Today I have no choice but to offend you!' As he finished saying he turned around like the wind and stretched his hand to attack the shoulder of the third monk. That monk shouted: 'You really wanna fight?' When this sentence was still unfinished, his shoulder had already been hit by Qiao Feng. His body immediately became weak. He flopped down on the ground.

Qiao Feng had learned martial arts of Shaolin School therefore he was totally familiar with the martial arts stances of the four monks. He continuously used palm attacks to knock them down one by one and said: 'Sorry for offending! May I ask the four masters, you said that you had come to

help too late, how did you know that my parents were gonna suffer misfortune? Who informed you four masters of this information?’

That tall monk said furiously: ‘You only wanna know about the informer to go murder him. How can Shaolin disciples yield to the oppressive interrogation of you lowly Khitan dog? Even if you use cruel torture, don’t imagine that you’ll be able to wring half a word outta my mouth.’

Qiao Feng thought: ‘The misunderstanding has become deeper and deeper. No matter what I’ll ask them about, they’ll all think that I’ll be interrogating them.’ He stretched out his hand and gave each of them a few rubs on the back, releasing the blocked acupuncture points of the four monks, and said: ‘If I wanna kill witnesses, at this moment I would’ve taken the lives of the four of you. Who’s right? Who’s wrong? What’s the truth? I always hope there’ll be a day when everything will come to light.’

Suddenly, he heard a man sneer and say beside the mountain slope: ‘Wanna kill witnesses? That wouldn’t have necessarily been so easy!’

Qiao Feng raised his head and saw more than ten Shaolin monks standing next to the mountain slope, holding weapons in their hands. The two leading monks both were about fifty years old. Each of them was holding a convenient shovel (fang bian chan - 方邊鐮) whose one head was a crescent blade made of refined steel which radiated a gloomy blue cold light. Those two monks had shining eyes which looked like shooting at other people. At first sight, it could be known that their internal energies were very profound. Even though Qiao Feng did not fear them, he knew the martial arts of the people who had just arrived were not bad and if he had to fight them, unless he killed and wounded some people, it would be difficult to retreat unharmed. He cupped his fist in his hand and said: ‘Qiao Feng has to be rude. Dashi’s, I beg for your forgiveness.’

Suddenly his body flew backwards. His back hit and broke the door. He entered the earthen house.

This incident happened extremely fast. All the monks exclaimed in unison. Five or six people rushed forwards at the same time but when they just reached the edge of the door, a stream of internal energy was shot out from the inside. These five or six people raised their left palms and hastily used their internal energies to resist. A loud 'peng' sound was heard. Dust flew upwards. All of them were forced to take four or five steps back by the power of the palm attack sent out from the inside. After standing stably, they all felt their blood and internal energies tumbling up and down in their chests. They looked at each other blankly and in their heart they totally understood: 'Though this palm attack of Qiao Feng's was ferocious, he still has spare power. If he sends out the second palm attack, I may not be able to ward it off.' They all firmly believed that he was extremely ruthless and malicious, and hence they only thought that he was gathering up his power to strike again, but they could never have expected that he had actually showed mercy with that palm attack and had not wanted to harm other people.

The monks collected power and put on their guards. After a long while, the two leading monks lifted their convenient shovels and executed the 'Two Dragons Entering the Cave' stance simultaneously. The movement of the shovels produced powerful winds. Along with the shovels, the two monks entered the earthen house side by side. Clang clang clang, the two shovels clashed, creating a glittering net to protect their bodies. But they saw that the inside of the house was empty. Where was Qiao Feng? Even stranger was that the corpses of Qiao Sanhuai and his wife had also disappeared without a trace.

The two monks who used convenient shovels were the 'Precept Maintaining monk' and the 'Rule Protecting monk' of the 'Institute of Precepts' of Shaolin Monastery whose

duty was supervising the conduct of the disciples of their school. They normally traveled in jianghu to examine the achievements and mistakes of the disciples of the school therefore their martial arts were no doubt very good, and they had vast knowledge which could be matched by even fewer people. Seeing that in an instant Qiao Feng had gone in a direction unbeknown to them, the two already knew that it had been extremely hard. But who could have expected that he would be able to take along the the corpses of Qiao Sanhuai and his wife? This was even more unimaginable. All the monks ransacked the areas in front of and behind the house, the head of the earthen bed (t/n: in Northern China, it was common for people to use beds made of clay or brick which were connected to kitchen stoves for warmth) and the kitchen one time. The two monks from the Institute of Precepts then rapidly chased down the mountain, but after chasing for more than twenty li's (1 li = 0.5 km), there was still no trace of Qiao Feng at all.

No one could have expected Qiao Feng to clasp the corpses of his parents and rush up Mt. Shaoshi. He fled to a steep slope which was dense with forest trees and hard for people to reach. After burying his parents, he knelt down and respectfully kowtowed eight times, praying in his mind: 'Dad, mom, who carried out this murderous scheme and took your lives? I'll definitely capture the killer, take them to your graves and cut their heart out alive as a sacrifice to you.'

He thought this time returning home he had been late by just a step, thus not being able to meet his parents again, otherwise seeing that he himself had already grown up to be this vigorous and imposing they would have surely been very joyful. Had the three of them been able to meet for one day or half a day, then at least they would have had a short-lived happiness. Thinking to here, he could not help crying without being able to make any noise. Since childhood he had been resilient and wept very little, but today he was

extremely grieved and indignant therefore he could not prevent his tears from streaming down.

All of a sudden a thought appeared in his mind. Inwardly, he called: 'A'yo, no good, perhaps my first enshi (kind master) Xuan Ku dashi (great monk) is gonna meet with serious dangers too.'

He suddenly understood several matters: 'It really wasn't by coincidence that the murderer of my parents did the killing within one hour before I returned home like this. He already had premeditated plots. After the killing he immediately told the monks of Shaolin Monastery that I was going up Mt. Shaoshi to kill my parents to eliminate witnesses. Those Shaolin monks cherish heroism and righteousness and wholeheartedly wanted to save my parents, but they have bumped into me. In this world there's still one person who knows my origin, that is, Master Xuan Ku. I must beware of that thug laying his murderous hands on him again and framing me for that.'

Thinking that Xuan Ku dashi might be in danger because of himself, he could not help feeling extremely anxious and immediately dashed towards Shaolin Monastery. He knew clearly that the monastery was filled with experts and each of the few elderly monks of the Damo Hall had significant skills, if he himself showed up, the monks would attack together right away and it would not be easy to escape, and hence he only chose unfrequented trails to rush on. Caught on thorns and weeds, his trouser legs became ragged and his calves were dripping with blood, but he had to follow this way. Using these trails to go up the mountain, the distance was increased by a half. Only after running quickly for two hours had he arrived at the back of Shaolin Monastery. At that moment, it was already at dusk. He felt both happy and worried. Feeling happy because in the dark it would be easy to hide, and feeling worried because if the murderer took advantage of the dark to attack sneakily, it would be difficult to detect traces of him.

When traveling in jianghu for the past recent years he had rarely met a match, but he had never met an enemy who undoubtedly had excellent martial arts, elaborate plans and cruel calculations like this time. Even though Shaolin Monastery was an extremely dangerous place, they did not guard against someone going to the monastery to attack Xuan Ku dashi, therefore if someone launched a surprise attack, it would be hard to escape their sneaky scheme. How come Qiao Feng did not know that he himself was being under very serious suspicion? If at this moment Xuan Ku dashi had been murdered without anyone seeing the appearance of the killer and he himself was seen sneakily entering the monastery then even with one hundred mouths he would not be able to explain it away. If at this moment he only cared about himself and disregarded other people, the farther he got away from Shaolin the better it would be for him. But firstly, he thought about the safety of enshi Xuan Ku dashi, and secondly, he wanted to seize the opportunity to catch the real murderer and take revenge for the deaths of his parents, hence he did not pay attention to great risks and dangers.

He had lived at Mt. Shaoshi for more than ten years, but he had never entered Shaolin Monastery, therefore he did not know anything about the directions, halls and institutes inside the monastery, and certainly he did not know where Xuan Ku dashi lived. He thought: 'I only hope enshi is totally safe. Upon seeing him I'll report the course of events to him and beg laorenjia (□□□ - polite term to address old people) to take care, after that I'll ask about my origin, maybe enshi would be able to guess who the real murderer is.'

There were far more than several tens of halls and compounds in Shaolin Monastery which were located scattered on mountain slopes from the east to the west. Xuan Ku dashi did not hold any position in the monastery and there were at least more than twenty monks with the generation name 'Xuan' who wore similar clothes to each

other, where to find him in the dark? Qiao Feng secretly planned: 'The only way is catching a Shaolin monk then forcing him to take me to see Xuan Ku dashi. After that, I'll explain that I had no choice and seriously apologize to him. But Shaolin monks generally respect their masters and treasure righteousness, if he thinks that I wanna harm Xuan Ku dashi, probably he'd rather die than submit and definitely be unwilling to reveal his whereabouts. Hum, I might as well find a cook and ask him to lead me, but these people may not know the place of my master.'

For the moment he hesitated and had no plan. Every time he passed by a hall or a wing-room he stooped down beside a window to listen, hoping that he would be able to have a clue. Even though he was tall and big in stature, his movements were quick, leaping up and drooping down like a lynx without being noticed by anyone.

He kept going and listening like this. When he reached the side of a small house, suddenly he heard someone say inside: 'Abbot has important matters to discuss, shishu (apprentice uncle who is younger than one's master) please go to the 'Institute of Faith Attestation' immediately.' Another aged voice said: 'Yes! I'm going right now.' Qiao Feng thought: 'Abbot's gathering people to discuss important matters, maybe my master will go as well. I'd better follow these people to the 'Institute of Faith Attestation'.' A 'ya' sound was heard, the door was pushed open and two monks came out, the aged one going westwards, and the junior one hurriedly going eastwards, perhaps he was going to notify other people.

Qiao Feng thought because the Abbot had invited this elderly monk to go discuss important matters, the rank or status of this person had to be high, and because Shaolin Monastery was different than other cloisters, it was certain that all the people with high ranks or status here also possessed profound martial arts. Not daring to follow closely behind the monk, Qiao Feng only looked at his back and

followed him from a distance. He saw him go straight toward the west and walk into a westernmost house. Qiao Feng waited until the monk had entered the house, only then did he go around to the back of it. After listening out and knowing clearly that there was no one around, he bent down beside a window.

He felt both grieved and indignant, thinking to himself: 'Since I started to travel in Jianghu, when treating fellow orthodox people in Wulin, has there ever been even a single matter in which I wasn't straightforward and didn't have superiority? Yet today I've been forced to be this sneaky. If by any chance I'm discovered, though I've always have an illustrious name, where will I be able to hide my face then?' But he immediately had another thought: 'In those years, master went down from the mountain every night to teach me martial arts, even if there were strong winds and heavy rain, he never skipped a night. I must repay such a serious kindness even if my body would be ground to dust, much less this tiny humiliation.'

He heard footsteps outside the house then four people successively came in. Before long, two other people came in. Their shadows fell on the paper of the window. There were more than ten people gathering in total. Qiao Feng thought: 'If they discuss important secret matters of Shaolin and are overheard by me, then even if it's unintentional, it'd still be improper. I'd better get away from this place. If master is inside the house, there're lots of experts here like this, no matter how dangerous the murderer is they'd not be able to harm him. After the monks finish discussing and disperse I'll think of a way to meet master.'

When he was about to go away quietly, he heard more than ten monks inside the house start to chant at the same time. Qiao Feng did not know what Buddhist sutra they were chanting, but he felt their voices were stately and solemn, and the chanting tones of some people also had an air of considerable sorrow and distress. This passage of sutra kept

being chanted for a very long time. He gradually felt uneasy and thought: 'It seems they're performing some kind of Buddhist memorial service, or meditating or studying sutras, perhaps my master isn't here.' He tilted his ear to listen carefully, and as expected, he did not hear the composed thick voice of Xuan Ku dashi in the chorus of the monks chanting sutra.

When he still could not decide whether or not he should wait for a while, the sound of chanting stopped and a dignified voice was heard: 'Xuan Ku shidi (younger apprentice brother), would you still like to say something?' Qiao Feng was very happy: 'Master really is here, laorenjia (term to call old people politely) is safe and sound too. So, just now he didn't chant sutra together with other people.'

A person started to say in a deep and powerful voice. Hearing the voice, Qiao Feng knew that he was no one other than his first master Xuan Ku dashi, who said: 'The day xiaodi (I, this little brother) was initiated into monkhood, my late master named me Xuan Ku. The seven sufferings (Ku) that the Buddha mentioned are birth, aging, illness, death, contact with the hated ones, separation from the loved ones, and frustrated desires. Xiaodi has made great efforts to escape from these seven sufferings, but I could only assist myself, and not other people. I feel ashamed of this. The suffering of contact with the hated ones is a state that the human life is bound to have. I deserve to get this retribution for the causes I sowed before. Shixiong's (older apprentice brother) and shidi's, seeing me repay my former karma like this, you should feel happy for me.' Qiao Feng noticed that his voice was calm, but what he said was the language of Buddhism, therefore he himself did not understand what he meant.

That dignified voice continued: 'Xuan Bei shidi lost his life at the hands of a villain several months ago. Having been chasing down the murderer with all our power, we seem to have violated the precept of not being angry. But

taming demon and punishing villain are deeds that help the people everywhere. As martial arts learners, our real intentions are spreading Buddhist teachings and following the infinitely compassionate merciful heart of the Buddha to free all living creatures from sufferings...' Qiao Feng thought: 'The person with the dignified voice is most proly the Abbot of Shaolin Monastery Xuan Ci dashi.' He heard him continue: '... Eliminating a villain is equal to saving countless people. Shidi, is that person Murong of Gusu?'

Qiao Feng thought: 'This matter involves the Murong clan of Gusu again. I've heard that Xuan Bei dashi of Shaolin School was sneakily killed in Dali. Could it be that they're suspecting Mr. Murong of committing the murder?'

He heard Xuan Ku Dashi say: 'Abbot Shixiong, xiaodi is unwilling to make you and other shixiong's and shidi's worry about me because that would increase the retribution for my sins. If that person can put down the butcher knife, naturally it won't be too late for him to repent of his sins and find a way out. But if he persists in his wrongdoings, alas, he'll only make himself suffer for nothing. There's also no need to talk about how that person looks like.'

Abbot Xuan Ci dashi said: 'That's right! Shidi has great understanding and wise opinions. Being an overly intolerant shixiong, my level has fallen behind to some extent.' Xuan Ku said: 'Xiaodi wants to meditate for a while to ruminate and repent.' Xuan Ci said: 'Alright! You take good care.'

A 'ya' sound of the door opening was heard. A tall and skinny elderly monk slowly walked out first. After he had gone out for one zhang (3.333 m), there were seventeen other monks in total continuously following behind him. All of the eighteen monks were having their palms put together and their heads lowered in meditation, looking stately.

After the monks had gone far away, the inside of the house was totally quiet. Intimidated by the situation around, for the moment Qiao Feng did not dare to appear to knock the door. Suddenly he heard Xuan Ku Dashi say: 'Good

visitor coming from afar, why are you hesitant about entering?’

Qiao Feng was frightened and thought: ‘I’ve been holding my breath, even if other people were very close to me, they wouldn’t necessarily be able to notice that I’ve been hiding here. To have such hearing, Master’s internal energy cultivation is really outstanding.’ Without delay he respectfully walked to the door and said: ‘How are you, Master? Disciple Qiao Feng pays his respects to you.’

Xuan Ku softly uttered an ‘Ah’ sound and said: ‘Feng’er? I’m thinking about you and only hoping that I can meet you one time. Quickly come in.’ His voice was filled with happiness.

Qiao Feng was very happy. He hurriedly came in then immediately knelt down, kowtowed and said: ‘Master, normally I’ve rarely been at your service, making you miss me a lot. Seeing that you are healthy, this child is extremely happy.’ As he finished saying, he raised his head and looked at Xuan Ku.

Xuan Ku dashi at first was having a smiling expression on his face. When he saw Qiao Feng’s face in the light of the oil lamp, all of a sudden his expression changed greatly. He stood up and said in a trembling voice: ‘You... You... so it was you. So you’re Qiao Feng. I... I developed such a good disciple with my own hands?’ But his facial expression was both horrified and painful, and was also mixed with deep pity and regret.

Seeing that in the blink of an eye his master was already having a very strange expression, Qiao Feng was extremely astonished. He said: ‘Master, I’m Qiao Feng.’

Xuan Ku dashi said: ‘Good, good, good!’ After uttering the three ‘Good’ words continuously, he did not say anything else.

Qiao Feng did not dare to ask more and quietly waited to see if he had something to teach or instruct. He waited for a good while, but Xuan Ku dashi remained silent all along.

Qiao Feng looked at his master's face again, only seeing that his facial muscles were stiff and motionless, and his expression was exactly the same as it had been a moment ago. He could not refrain from jumping up in fright. When Qiao Feng reached out his hand to touch his master's palm, he felt that it was rather cold. He hastily checked his master's breathing, but it turned out to have already stopped for quite a while. This made Qiao Feng so frightened that he was dumbstruck. His mind was in chaos: 'As soon as master saw me he was frightened to death like this? Definitely improbable, what's so frightful about me? Prolly he was already injured.' But he did not dare to inspect his master's body.

After regaining composure, he decided in his mind: 'If I quietly left at this moment, how could it be considered the action of a tough brave man like Qiao Feng? Even if today's incidents are extremely dangerous, I should investigate and clear up everything.' He walked out of the house and shouted loudly and clearly: 'Abbot Dashi, Xuan Ku dashi has passed away. Xuan Ku dashi has passed away.' The sound of these two sentences went very far and echoed through the valley. Hence the entire monastery could hear them. Even though the shouting voice was powerful, it was extremely sad.

Abbot Xuan Ci and the other people had not got back to their respective rooms yet. Suddenly hearing the shouting of Qiao Feng, they turned around at the same time and quickly came back to the 'Institute of Faith Attestation.' They only saw a tall and big man standing beside the door and wiping tears from his face with his sleeves. All the monks found this strange. Xuan Ci put his palms together and asked: 'Shizhu (施主 - literally almsgiver/benefactor - a term that Buddhist monks/Taoists call normal people with), who are you?' Concerned about Xuan Ku's safety, he rushed into the house without waiting for Qiao Feng to reply. Seeing that Xuan Ku was still standing upright motionlessly without falling, he

was even more startled. The other monks came in together. They then lowered their heads and chanted sutra.

Qiao Feng was the last to enter the house. He knelt down and secretly prayed: 'Master, I came to inform you too late so you were already murdered by someone. The animosity between me and that villain has become deeper by one level. Even if I'd have to go through all difficulties, I'd find this villain and smash them into ten thousand pieces to avenge you, Enshi.'

Abbot Xuan Ci had finished chanting sutra. He sized up Qiao Feng and asked: 'Shizhu, who are you? Are you the person who shouted just now?'

Qiao Feng said: 'This disciple is Qiao Feng. Seeing that my master had passed away I couldn't bear the grief so I disturbed Abbot.'

When Xuan Ci heard Qiao Feng's name, he was frightened and his body trembled. A strange expression appeared on his face. After gazing at Qiao Feng for a long time, he said: 'Shizhu, you... you... are you the Beggar Society's... former Chief?'

Hearing he said the five words 'the Beggar Society's former Chief', Qiao Feng thought: 'Messages in jianghu spread very fast. He already knows that I'm no longer the Beggar Society's Chief. He must know the reasons why I was expelled from the Beggar Society as well.' He then said: 'Yes.'

Xuan Ci said: 'Shizhu, why do you trespass on our Monastery late at night? How could you see Xuan Ku shidi pass away?'

Qiao Feng was having thousands and thousands of words that he wanted to say but for the moment he did not know what he should say. He had no alternative but to reply: 'Xuan Ku dashi was the first enshi of this disciple. But what are the injuries that my enshi suffered? And who murdered him?'

With tears welling up in his eyes, Abbot Xuan Ci said: 'Xuan Ku shidi was taken by surprise by someone. His chest took a serious palm attack. All his ribs were broken and his five internal organs were crushed. He could endure until now only thanks to having profound internal energy. We asked him who the enemy was but he said he didn't know him. We also asked him how the murderer looked like and how old he was. But he said the suffering of contact with the hated ones was one of the seven sufferings of Buddhists, and meeting the enemy was the opportunity to free himself, so he resolutely didn't say anything about the appearance of the murderer.'

Qiao Feng suddenly understood: 'So just now the monks already knew that master had been seriously injured. They chanted sutra to see him off to the Western Pure Land.' Tears welled up in his eyes. He said: 'You're eminent monks so you think of mercy and forget hatred. Being an ordinary man, I'll catch this murderer and make him suffer the death of thousands of cuts to avenge my master, that's for sure. Your monastery is strictly guarded, how could that murderer penetrate into here?'

While Xuan Ci was pondering and had not replied, all of a sudden, an elderly monk who was short and small in stature coldly said: 'When shizhu penetrated into Shaolin, we couldn't stop or detect you. That murderer of course could also come and go as he pleased, as if entering a deserted place.'

Qiao Feng bent down, cupped his fist in his hand and said: 'Because the matter was urgent, I didn't have time to inform and make an appointment at the main entrance. I was being too disrespectful. Masters, I sincerely beg for your forgiveness. Having deep roots in Shaolin School, by no means do I dare to have the slightest intention of looking down on or offending it.' His last sentence hinted that if Shaolin School lost face, he would also be humiliated as a result. In his mind, he knew that after sneaking in Shaolin's

backyard, only when he himself had shouted had someone been aware of it. If this incident became known about by outsiders, it would really inflict huge damage on Shaolin School's prestige.

Right at this moment, a little Buddhist novice, who was holding a bowl of steaming hot medicine in both hands, entered the house and said to the corpse of Xuan Ku: 'Master, please take medicine.' He was the Buddhist novice who served Xuan Ku. He had just decocted a dose of a medicine that cured injuries effectively called the 'Nine Changes Rejuvenation Mixture' at the 'Institute of Medical King' and was bringing it to his master for him to take. Because he saw that Xuan Ku was standing upright without falling, he did not know that his master had died. Feeling grieved, Qiao Feng said in a voice choked with emotion: 'Master has...'

That little Buddhist novice turned his head and looked at him. Suddenly he cried out loudly: 'It's you! You've... come again!' A 'qiang' sound was heard, the bowl of medicine had been accidentally dropped on the ground. Porcelain fragments and medical liquid flew on all sides. That little Buddhist novice jumped backward two steps, leaned against the wall and squealed: 'It's him. It's him who injured master!'

As soon as he screamed so, everyone, without exception, was very frightened. Qiao Feng was even more terrified. He said loudly: 'What did you say?' That little Buddhist novice was only twelve or thirteen years old. Seeing Qiao Feng, he was extremely scared and hid behind Abbot Xuan Ci. He pulled the Abbot's sleeve and shouted: 'Abbot, Abbot!' Xuan Ci said: 'Qing Song, there's no need to be scared. Just tell us. You say it's him who injured master?' The little Buddhist novice Qing Song said: 'Yes, when he hit master in the chest using his palm I was watching from the window. Master, Master, why don't you strike back at him?' Until this moment, he still did not know that Xuan Ku had died.

Abbot Xuan Ci said: 'You should watch carefully. Don't mistake other people for him.' Qing Song said: 'I saw very clearly, he was wearing gray clothes made directly of cotton and had a square face, his eyebrows were slanted like this, his mouth and ears were big, it's exactly him. Master, beat him, beat him.'

Qiao Feng felt a chill run down his spine. He thought: 'That's right. The murderer disguised as me to shift the blame onto me. Hearing me return, at first master was extremely joyful, but as soon as he saw my face, seeing me and his murderer look exactly alike, he then said: 'So it was you. So you're Qiao Feng. I developed such a good disciple with my own hands.' Master and I haven't met for more than ten years. From a child I already became an adult. My appearance wasn't the same long ago.' Recalling that Xuan Ku dashi had continuously said three 'Good' words before dying, he felt as if a knife was piercing his heart: 'Master took serious attacks, but he didn't know who the enemy was. When he saw me, realizing that I and the murderer have similar appearances, he was very sad and died because of grief. Having suffered serious injuries, master was already on the brink of death so certainly he couldn't think carefully that: if I had really harmed him, why would I come to meet him the second time?'

Suddenly, a hubbub of human voices could be heard then a group of people trotted towards the 'Institute of Faith Attestation' before stopping outside it. Two monks bent forward and respectfully came in. They were the Precept Maintaining monk and the Rule Protecting monk who had fought against Qiao Feng at the foot of Mt. Shaoshi. When that Precept Maintaining monk had just said: 'Abbot..' he saw Qiao Feng. An amazed and angry expression appeared on his face, showing that he did not know when Qiao Feng had come here. The other monks also frowned and fiercely goggled at Qiao Feng with glaring eyes.

With a stately expression, Abbot Xuan Ci slowly said: 'Shizhu, you no longer belong to the Beggar Society, but you're a famous figure in wulin. Today arriving at our monastery why did you strike dead Xuan Ku shidi? I hope to be counseled by you about that.'

Qiao Feng let out a deep sigh, knelt and bowed down to the corpse of Xuan Ku and said: 'Master, at your dying moment you still said that this disciple harmed you so that you died with a grievance. I never dare to offend you, but the villain attacked you only because of me. Even if I died today to apologize to you I really wouldn't resent it, but from now on the great wrong you suffered may not be avenged. I've violated the sanctity of Shaolin, please forgive me, Master.' All of a sudden, two 'hu-hu' sounds were heard, he had blown out two long gusts of air. The two oil lamps in the hall were immediately extinguished. In an instant, the hall went pitch dark.

When praying, Qiao Feng had already devised a plan to escape. Right after blowing out the oil lamps, he swung at the Rule Protecting monk with his left palm and hit his back. This palm attack only used Yin soft power therefore it did not injure his internal organs, but it sent his corpulent body flying out, breaking open the door of the hall in the process.

Hearing the sound of wind in the dark, all the monks thought that Qiao Feng was running away through the door. Each of them grasped at the body of the Rule Protecting monk using a grasping hand technique. They all thought the same, not wanting to use severe attacks to kill Qiao Feng, and only wanting to capture him to interrogate more about why he had killed Xuan Ku dashi. These more than ten high-level monks were first-class experts of Shaolin Monastery. First-class experts of Shaolin Monastery were naturally also first-class experts in wulin. The respective grasping hand techniques they used were different from each other, each of which had its own uniqueness. In a short period of time, the best grasping hand techniques of Shaolin School such as the

Dragon Capturing technique, the Eagle-Clawed technique, the Tiger Catching technique, the Diamond Finger technique, the Stone Holding Palm technique... all were executed on the body of the Rule Protecting monk. The monks really had excellent martial arts, in the dark they could only hear the sound of wind, yet their stances did not miss even by a hair's breadth. This time, that Rule Protecting monk tasted all kinds of sufferings. In a very short time, the important acupuncture points on his whole body were hit by various grasping hand techniques, his body was held up in the air and he was unable to talk. Perhaps no one had ever undergone this kind of experience before.

These high-level monks were very experienced therefore their improvisation methods were also remarkable. Some people immediately jumped onto the roof to guard there. And in a short while, the important places in the passages and at the front door and back door of the Institute of Faith Attestation were also occupied by experts. Needless to say, Qiao Feng was a tall and big man. Even if he morphed into a wild cat or a mouse, he would possibly not be able to escape either.

The little Buddhist novice Qing Song used a fire-striking knife and a flint to light the oil lamps in the hall. The monks then immediately discovered that they had wrongly caught the Rule Protecting monk.

The head of the Damo Institute (in an earlier paragraph JY called this building the Damo Hall) Xuan Ku ordered that every monk in the monastery keep watch on his own position and not act chaotically. The monks all thought that even if Qiao Feng had been bolder he would never dare to penetrate into an extremely dangerous place like Shaolin Monastery alone to commit murder, he definitely had strong aid, it was likely that he had other schemes to take advantage of the confusion, and they themselves were not allowed to fall victim to the tactic of luring the tiger out of the mountain.

More than ten high-level monks in the Institute of Faith Attestation and the monks who were led by the Precept Maintaining monk then searched carefully everywhere in the vicinity of the Institute of Faith Attestation. Almost every stone was turned over, and every thicket was hit with stick. This time, even though the monks were lenient and cherished the lives of all living creatures, many toads, shrews, grasshoppers and ants were still accidentally injured.

After busying themselves for more than two hours, the only thing they had not done was digging up the ground, but where could they find Qiao Feng? All the monks constantly clicked their tongues saying that this was strange, and sometimes they unavoidably said a few insulting sentences. Even though the ten precepts of Buddhism warned against using 'Evil Words', they were unable to pay attention to it. Right after that, they moved the corpse of Xuan Ku dashi into the 'Sarira Institute' for cremation and carried the Rule Protecting monk to the 'Institute of Medical King' to cure the injuries. They were all in very low spirits and rather silent, feeling that this time they had really lost face. Shaolin Monastery was packed with experts, and in terms of martial arts and reputation, each of these more than ten high-level monks had a resounding name in wulin, yet they had let Qiao Feng, with bare hands and being alone, come and go as he pleased. They could not have even the least idea how he had escaped, much less killing or capturing him.

It turned out that Qiao Feng had anticipated that as soon as an unforeseen event happened, the monks would certainly search everywhere all around, but they would definitely not care about the room in which they had just gathered a moment ago. Therefore, after sending the Rule Protecting monk flying out with a palm attack, he had immediately bent his body and got into the space underneath the bed on which Xuan Ku dashi had usually

slept before his death. With his ten fingers inserted into the bed base, he had been pressing his body close to it. Even though someone had already glanced at the space under the bed, he had not seen him. After the body of Xuan Ku dashi had been moved out, the execution monk shut the door of the Institute of Faith Attestation, hence no one came in anymore.

Lying horizontally underneath the bed, Qiao Feng heard the monks cause a commotion for a long time then the sounds of human voice gradually disappear. He thought: 'Waiting until dawn, it won't be easy to escape. If I don't leave here now, then when should I?' He then quietly came out from under the bed, gently pushed open the door, jinked and hid behind a tree.

He thought, even though by now the human voices had stopped, how could it be that the high-level monks of Shaolin had given up and loosened their guard at this point? The Institute of Faith Attestation was located at the western extremity of Shaolin Monastery so he only had to go westward to enter a cluster of mountains. As soon as they came out of Shaolin Monastery, the monks would have to spread out, so even if he met them, they would definitely not be able to intercept him. But he did not want to fight Shaolin monks at all and only hoped that someday he would be able to capture the real murderer, take them to the monastery and explain the whole thing. If today he fought and defeated one more monk, he would make another enemy for nothing. If he accidentally wounded or killed someone, the consequence of it would be even more unthinkable. He thought he himself had vanished from the western part of the monastery so the monks would certainly guard the paths in the west most tightly, therefore he should go through the monastery and leave from its eastern part.

He immediately stooped and quietly went under the cover of the trees. After going past four buildings, he hid behind a sacred fig tree. Suddenly he saw two monks

waiting in ambush behind a tree right in front of him. Those two monks were not moving a bit therefore it was hard to detect them in the dark, but with his sharp eyesight he had seen the flashes of the precept knife (戒刀 - jie dao - a Buddhist's knife that, according to the precepts of Buddhism, must not be used to harm living creatures) that a monk was holding in his hand. He thought: 'How dangerous! Had I gone a little bit too fast just now, I would definitely have been spotted.' He waited behind the tree for a while, but those two monks remained motionless all along. This 'Waiting for windfalls' method was unexpectedly very dangerous. If he made a move, he would be seen by those two monks instantly, but he also could not afford to be locked in a long stalemate and stay motionless all the while.

He slightly considered then picked up a small stone and flicked it out. He used his power very skillfully, making the stone go slowly at first but go fast afterward. When the stone started to fly out, there was no sound at all, but after it had gone for seven or eight zhang's (1 zhang = 3.333m), the sound of the air being pierced through became intense. The stone hit a big tree, making a strange sound. Those two monks stooped down and rushed towards that big tree.

Qiao Feng waited until the two monks went past him then he jumped up and climbed into a compound at his side. In the moonlight he saw clearly a horizontally inscribed board which read 'Bodhi Institute'. He knew when those two monks saw nothing unusual, they would definitely return, therefore he did not stop and walked fast straight towards the backyard, passed through the front hall of the Bodhi Institute, then leaned his body and entered the rear sanctum.

In the blink of an eye, he saw the shape of a man, who was exceptionally fast, flashing by from behind him. He had rarely seen a lightness skill this fast.

'What a skill! Who's this man?' Startled, Qiao Feng withdrew his palms to protect his body and turned around.

He could not help but burst out laughing as what he saw before him was only a man whose one palm was being placed in an obliquely upward position to protect his front, his chest being drawn in and his back being stretched. It turned out that there was a screen placed in front of the Buddha statues in the rear sanctum, and a very big copper mirror was installed on the screen. The mirror had been polished to a high gloss and Qiao Feng's own image was reflected in it. The copper mirror was engraved with four Buddhist metrical lines. As there were several oil lamps in front of the Buddha statues, in the dim light, he could vaguely see them:

'All the elements that have a form; Are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows; like dew and also like lightning; Like this should they be contemplated.'

[□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□.]

(These four lines were taken from the Diamond Sutra)

Qiao Feng smiled and turned around. When he was about to take a step, suddenly his mind felt as if being heavily hit by something. He was dumbstruck. He only knew that at this moment he had just thought of an abnormal important matter. But he was confused and could not ascertain what that matter was.

After standing there in a trance for a short while, he unconsciously turned around again and looked at the copper mirror. Seeing his own back, he came to realize all of a sudden: 'A little while ago I had a view of my own back, where did that happen? I've never seen such a big copper mirror, how could I see my own back clearly like this?' When he was still entranced, suddenly he heard footsteps outside the institute. Some people were walking towards the sanctum.

At that pressing moment, having nowhere to hide, he saw three Buddha statues standing side by side in the sanctum. Without delay he leaped on the altar and hid behind the third statue. He heard the footsteps of six people in total

who came in the rear sanctum abreast in two rows. Each of them sat down on a bulrush mat. From behind the Buddha statue Qiao Feng peeped out and saw that all the six people were middle-aged monks. He thought: 'If I run away from the rear sanctum now, if these six monks' martial arts are mediocre, they won't be able to detect me, but if just one of them has profound internal energy, and keen eyes and ears, he'll notice me right away. For the moment I'd better quietly wait and see here for a while.' Suddenly he heard a monk on the right-hand side say: 'Shixiong (older apprentice bro), this Bodhi Institute is an empty place, what sutra does it have? Why did master tell us to guard here, saying something like to prevent the enemy from stealing?' A monk on the right-hand side smiled and said: 'This is the secret of the Bodhi Institute. It's no use talking much about it.' The monk on the right-hand side said: 'Humph, I see that you may not know either.' The monk on the left-hand side could not bear the incitement. He said: 'How come I don't know? 'Yi Meng Ru Shi'...' (一梦如斯 - literally 'A Dream like This', I use the pinyin for the sake of faithfulness) When he had just said half of the sentence, he suddenly became cautious and stopped talking. The monk on the right-hand side said: 'What's 'Yi Meng Ru Shi'?' The monk who was sitting on the second bulrush mat said: 'Zhi Qing shidi (younger apprentice bro), normally you're not gossipy and meddlesome, why do you keep asking nonstop today? If you wanna know about the secret of the Bodhi Institute, then just go ask your own master.'

The monk named Zhi Qing did not ask anymore. After a while, he said: 'I'm going to the back to pass water.' As he finished saying he stood up. From the right-hand side he went to the side door on the left. When he passed by the back of the monk who was number five counting from the left, suddenly he raised his right foot and kicked that monk in the 'Xuanshu acupuncture point' on the back. The Xuanshu acupuncture point was located beneath the

thirteenth vertebra. That monk was sitting cross-legged on a bulrush mat therefore his Xuanshu acupuncture point was right on the edge of the mat. After he was hit by Zhi Qing's tiptoe, his body slowly fell rightwards. Zhi Qing had kicked very fast without making any sound. Next he kicked the fourth monk in the 'Xuanshu acupuncture point' then kicked the third monk. In a very short time he had continuously downed three monks with his kicks.

From behind the Buddha statue Qiao Feng saw that clearly. He was very surprised because he did not understand why infighting suddenly arose among these Shaolin monks. He saw Zhi Qing raise his foot and kick the second monk on the left-hand side. When the tiptoe just touched his acupuncture point, two of the three monks whose acupuncture points had been hit by him fell down from the bulrush mats. Their heads hit the brick floor of the sanctum, creating peng peng sounds. The monk on the left-hand side was startled and jumped to his feet to look carefully. Catching a glimpse of Zhi Qing knocking down the monk behind him with a kick, he was even more frightened and asked: 'Zhi Qing, what are you doing?' Zhi Qing pointed outside and said: 'You see. Who's coming?' That monk turned around and looked outside. Zhi Qing then raised the right foot and quickly threw a kick at his back.

As this kick was executed very fast, it should be impossible to miss. But this sneak attack was reflected clearly in the copper mirror in front of them therefore that monk slanted his body and dodged it. He struck back with his palm and asked: 'Are you crazy?' Zhi Qing executed his stances like the wind. When they exchanged the eighth stances, that monk's lower abdomen took a punch then he received a kick. Seeing Zhi Qing use Yin, soft and ruthless stances, which were absolutely not techniques of Shaolin School, Qiao Feng felt even more surprised.

That monk knew that he was no match for Zhi Qing, therefore he shouted loudly: 'Spy. Spy...' Zhi Qing strode

forwards and hit him in the chest with his left fist. That monk immediately fell down and lost consciousness.

Zhi Qing quickly ran to the copper mirror. He extended his right forefinger and gave the word 'Yi' (一 - A) in the first line of the Buddhist verse a push. Through the mirror Qiao Feng saw him follow that by pushing the word 'Meng' (梦 - Dream) in the second line. He thought: 'That monk said the secret was 'Yi Meng Ru Shi'. There're four 'Ru' words (如 - Like) on the mirror, which one should be pushed?'

He only saw Zhi Qing extend his finger and push the first 'Ru' word in the third line, then push the word 'Shi' (是 - This) in the fourth line. When his finger had not yet left the surface of the mirror, chugging sounds were heard. The copper mirror already slowly turned over.

This was a good chance for Qiao Feng if he wanted to run away at this moment, but he got curious and wanted to see exactly why this Shaolin monk wanted to harm his fellow disciples and what there was behind the copper mirror. He thought maybe they had something to do with the murder of Xuan Ku dashi.

Before being hit by Zhi Qing, the first monk on the left-hand side had shouted loudly. There were more than one hundred monks being on patrol all around in Shaolin Monastery, hence as soon as they heard the shouting, they rushed to where it had started. Not just a few footsteps were heard on all sides east, south, west, and north of the Bodhi Institute.

Qiao Feng hesitated: 'I mustn't let them spot any trail of me.' But he thought after the monks arrived, they would focus their eyes on Zhi Qing, he would have a great chance to extricate himself therefore there was no need to hurriedly escape. He saw Zhi Qing reach into a small hole behind the copper mirror to search but find nothing. At this moment, the footsteps from the north had already drawn near the outside of the Bodhi Institute.

Zhi Qing stamped his foot. Obviously he was totally disappointed. When he was about to turn around and leave, suddenly he lowered his body to look at the back of the mirror then cried out happily in a low voice: 'It is here!' He stretched out his hand to take out from the back of the copper mirror a small package and put it into his bosom. He then wanted to find a way to flee, but at this moment there were a lot of monks gathering all around and there was no way out already. Zhi Qing swept around then immediately rushed out through the front door of the Bodhi Institute.

Qiao Feng thought: 'Going out like this, it's impossible for this man not to be captured instantly.' At this moment, he suddenly felt the sound of wind. Someone was rushing into the place where he was hiding. Qiao Feng located this person by hearing the wind. Stretching out his left hand, he grabbed the left wrist of the enemy. He then raised his right hand and exerted pressure on the Shendao acupuncture point on his back, sending out his internal energy. The whole body of that man immediately went numb, felt exhausted and became unable to move. After catching the enemy, Qiao Feng looked carefully at his face and saw that this man was surprisingly Zhi Qing. He was startled but immediately understood: 'That's right! This man is just like me, also wanting to hide behind the Buddha statues. Luckily he also chooses the third statue, perhaps because this statue has the portliest body. Why did he rush out of the front door first then quietly come in through the back door? Ah, there're five monks lying on the floor, when outsiders enter and ask, those five monks will all say that he has escaped through the front door, everyone will then be unlikely to search in this Bodhi Institute. Oh dear, this man is really good at scheming.'

Qiao Feng considered, his hand still holding Zhi Qing. He then put his lips next to Zhi Qing's ear and said in a low voice: 'If you make a noise, I'll take your life in a palm attack, get it?' Zhi Qing nodded.

At this moment, seven or eight monks rushed in through the main entrance, three of whom were holding torches. The sanctum immediately lit up. Seeing that there were five monks lying on the floor of the sanctum, they immediately clamored: 'That villain Qiao Feng's carried out a murderous scheme again!' 'Hum, they're Zhi Zhan and Zhi Yuan shixiong's!' 'A'yo! No good! Why was this copper mirror lifted up? Qiao Feng has stolen the sutra of the Bodhi Institute!' 'Hurry up and report to Abbot.' Hearing these people commenting noisily, Qiao Feng could not refrain from smiling bitterly: 'This debt is again passed on to me.' In a short period of time, there were more and more monks gathering in the sanctum.

Qiao Feng felt Zhi Qing struggling, wanting to pull free. He understood his intention: 'The monks are gathering in the sanctum. Zhi Zhan, Zhi Yuan and the others haven't regained consciousness. If this Zhi Qing guy wants to escape, this moment is a good chance. Even if he arrogantly appears in the sanctum, no one would have a doubt as they all think that I'm the culprit.' He immediately had another thought: 'It seems this Zhi Qing guy isn't clever enough. A little while ago, why did he need to hide here? Had he come out from the sanctum, why would someone possibly have had interrogated him?'

Suddenly, the human voices in the sanctum stopped, no one said a word anymore. After that all the monks said in unison: 'Paying my respects to Abbot. Paying my respects to the Damo Institute's Head. Paying my respects to the Nagarjuna Institute's Head.'

Soft pai-pai sounds were heard. Someone had used his palm to wake Zhi Zhan, Zhi Yuan and the other three monks up. Then someone asked: 'Is it Qiao Feng who did this? How could he know about the secret of the copper mirror?' Zhi Zhan said: 'It's not Qiao Feng. It's Zhi Qing...' All of a sudden, he jumped up and scolded: 'Good, good! Why did you sneakily attack your fellow disciples?'

From behind the Buddha statue Qiao Feng was unable to see who he was scolding.

He only heard one man cry out in fear: 'Zhi Zhan shixiong, why do you pull me?!' Zhi Zhan angrily said: 'You kicked the five of us down and stole the hidden sutra. How daring! Abbot, the traitor Zhi Qing illegally opened the copper mirror of the Bodhi Institute and stole the sutra!' That man cried out: 'What? What? I've always been with Abbot, how could I come here to steal that hidden sutra thing?'

An aged hoarse voice sternly said: 'Close the copper mirror first then relate what happened.'

Zhi Yuan went and put the copper mirror back to its original position. This time, Qiao Feng saw clearly in the mirror the situation of the monks in the sanctum. He saw a monk gesticulating, looking very agitated. When Qiao Feng looked at him, he could not help feeling startled as it turned out this man was Zhi Qing. Surprised, Qiao Feng involuntarily turned his head and looked at the monk at his side who had been captured by himself. He saw that this man's appearance was completely the same as that of the Zhi Qing in the sanctum. If looking at them carefully, he might notice some tiny differences, but in a glance, it was really impossible to tell them apart. Qiao Feng considered: 'In the world, people with similar appearances like this are extremely rare. That's right, perhaps they are twin brothers. This plan is unexpectedly pretty clever. One became a monk at Shaolin Monastery and one waited outside. When there was an opportunity, the other one disguised as a monk and came in the monastery to steal the sutra. That real Zhi Qing didn't get away from the Abbot even by a single step so of course nobody would suspect him.'

Qiao Feng only heard Zhi Zhan successively related things like how Zhi Qing had asked about the secret of the copper mirror, how he himself should not have blurted out the four words, how Zhi Qing had pretended to go outside to

pass water then sneakily kicked down four monks, and how Zhi Qing had fought against and flattened himself. While Zhi Zhan was recounting, Zhi Yuan and the other three monks repeatedly chimed in and confirmed that there was nothing false in his words.

Abbot Xuan Ci had all along had a disapproving expression on his face. Waiting until Zhi Zhan had finished relating, he slowly asked: 'Did you see clearly? Was it really Zhi Qing without a doubt?' Zhi Zhan, Zhi Yuan and the other monks said in unison: 'Abbot, there's no enmity between us and Zhi Qing, why should we frame him?' Xuan Ci sighed and said: 'There's definitely something strange about this. A short while ago Zhi Qing was always at my side without leaving. The Head of the Damo Institute was also with us.'

As soon as the Abbot said so, none of the monks in the sanctum dared to make any sound. The Head of the Damo Institute Xuan Nan dashi said: 'Correct. I also saw Zhi Qing accompany Abbot Shixiong. How come he could go to the Bodhi Institute to steal sutra?' The Head of the Nagarjuna Institute Xuan Ji asked: 'Zhi Zhan, when that Zhi Qing fought you, was there anything unusual about his stances?' He was the person with the aged hoarse voice.

Zhi Zhan uttered a loud cry and said: 'A'yo! Why haven't I thought about this? When that Zhi Qing fought this disciple, what he was using weren't the martial arts of our school.' Xuan Ji said: 'Then can you recognize what school those martial arts belong to?' Seeing that Zhi Zhan was having a blank expression and was unable to answer, Xuan Ji asked again: 'Was it Long Fist or a close-quarters technique? A Grasping hand technique? Ditang (Ground Tumbling Fist), Liuhe (Six Harmonies Fist), Tongbi (Full Arm Fist)?' Zhi Zhan said: 'He... He used very vicious martial arts. I was unaccountably hit by him several times.'

The Abbot and the elderly monks with the highest rank such as Xuan Ji and Xuan Nan looked at each other. They thought that today opponents of extremely good abilities

had come to the monastery and used deceitful tricks to make everyone feel as if being in a thick fog, therefore the immediate plan was, on the one hand, speeding up inspection, and on the other hand, dealing with everything calmly and facing the fearful with no fear, otherwise turbulence would arise in the monastery and the disaster would perhaps become even harder to put in order.

Xuan Ci put his palms together and said: 'The sutra hidden in the Bodhi Institute is a Mahayana sutra written by an eminent monk of an older generation in our monastery to promulgate Buddhism and assist human beings. If a Buddhist disciple acquires it and studies it intensively, he would naturally gain quite a few marvelous benefits. But if an ordinary person acquires it and doesn't value it, the sin really wouldn't be trivial. Shidi's and shizhi's (apprentice nephews), please return to your own institutes to rest. The ones who have duties carry them out as usual.'

Following his order, the monks dispersed. Only the people such as Zhi Zhan and Zhi Yuan were still nagging nonstop at Zhi Qing. Xuan Ji gave them a stare. Scared, Zhi Zhan and other people did not dare to talk anymore and went out side by side together with Zhi Qing.

After those monks had left, there were only three monks Xuan Ci, Xuan Nan and Xuan Ji in the sanctum. They were sitting on the bulrush mats in front of the Buddha statues. Xuan Ci suddenly said: 'Amitabha, how sinful, how sinful!' As he finished saying these eight words, all of a sudden the three monks jumped up and went around to the back of the Buddha statue. From three different directions they sent their palm attacks towards Qiao Feng at the same time.

It was unexpected to Qiao Feng that these three monks had already discovered his own place by looking in the copper mirror. It was even more unexpected to him that these three senile elderly monks struck as soon as they finished saying and their palm attacks were fast and fierce like this. In an instant, he already felt his breathing had

become heavy and the air in his chest was blocked. The joint attack of the three high-level monks of Shaolin Monastery was really no small matter. When he tried to tell the directions of the palm attacks apart at that urgent moment, he only felt that the five directions above him, below him, on his left, on his right, and at his back were already enveloped by the palm force of the three monks, if he was determined to break through, it would be impossible not to use hard techniques, if he did not injure the opponents, he himself would be injured. At that moment, not having time to think carefully, he channeled internal energy into his two palms and pushed out forwards. With loud ka-la-la sounds, the Buddha statue in front of him was pushed down. Qiao Feng conveniently lifted Zhi Qing up and leaped forwards. He suddenly felt a swift and fierce palm wind at his back. The palm force had not yet arrived but the wind force had already reached him.

Qiao Feng was unwilling to clash palms with or try his power against high-level Shaolin monks therefore his right hand grabbed the screen in front of him on which the copper mirror was installed, then he turned his wrist and moved his arm backwards, using the screen to cover his back like a shield. Only a loud 'deng' sound was heard, a palm attack of Xuan Nan had hit the copper mirror, causing a shock that made Qiao Feng feel a little pain and numbness in his right arm. The screen around the mirror was broken into several pieces.

Qiao Feng made use of the force of this palm attack of Xuan Nan and jumped forwards more than one zhang (3.333 m). Suddenly he heard someone at his back taking a deep breath. The sound of the breath was louder than usual. Qiao Feng knew instantly that a high-level Shaolin monk was going to use a type of martial arts akin to the 'Air Splitting Divine Fist.' Despite not fearing him, he himself did not want to waste internal energy together with him either, hence,

without delay, he blocked his back with the copper mirror and also channeled internal energy into his right arm.

At that moment, he only felt the palm wind of the opponent coming at a slanting angle, the direction of the palm attack was really bizarre. Qiao Feng was very surprised but he immediately understood. That elderly monk's palm force was not for hitting his back, but instead, was aimed at Zhi Qing's back. As Qiao Feng and Zhi Qing did not know each other, he at first had no intention of saving him, but because he was already carrying him in his hand, the idea of taking care of him involuntarily appeared in his mind. Therefore, he pushed the copper mirror to shield Zhi Qing with it. Only a low unclear 'pai' sound was heard then the sound from the copper mirror disappeared. It turned out this mirror had already been cracked by the palm force of Xuan Nan before, therefore, at this moment, when it was again hit by the Air Splitting Palm of Abbot Xuan Ci, it sounded like a gong getting broken.

When moving the mirror backwards to block the attack, Qiao Feng had already lifted Zhi Qing and jumped up towards the roof. He felt that his body was very light, really being out of proportion with his tall and big stature. But when that sound, which was rather like the sound of a gong getting broken, was heard, strangely, he could not stand firmly on the eaves, his knees became weak and he fell back. Ever since he had started to travel in jianghu he had never met such a formidable opponent, therefore he could not help being startled. He immediately turned around and stood on the ground like a lofty mountain, showing a mighty bearing and paying absolutely no attention to the fact that he was being surrounded by strong enemies.

Xuan Ci said: 'Amitabha, Qiao shizhu (almsgiver), besides coming to Shaolin Monastery and committing murder, you've also destroyed Buddha statues.'

Xuan Ji shouted loudly: 'Take one palm attack of mine!' He moved his two palms inwards from the sides in circles

then slowly pushed them out towards Qiao Feng. When his palm force had not yet arrived, Qiao Feng already felt his breathing had become difficult in his chest. In an instant, Xuan Ji's palm force came fiercely like a raging tidal wave.

Qiao Feng threw the copper mirror away and struck back with an 'Arrogant Dragon Having Remorse' stance in the 'Eighteen Dragon Subduing Palms'. When the two streams of palm force met each other, they produced chi-chi sounds. Both Xuan Nan and Qiao Feng had to move back three steps. For a very short time, Qiao Feng felt his whole body had no strength and he also let Zhi Qing slip out of his hand. But as soon as he channeled his internal energy, he felt vigorous again. Without waiting for Xuan Ji to send out the second palm attack, he shouted: 'I must take my leave!' He then lifted Zhi Qing up and leaped onto the roof.

The two monks Xuan Nan and Xuan Ji both uttered a 'yi' sound simultaneously and felt extremely astonished. The palm attack sent out by Xuan Ji just now had really gathered all of his power and was called 'One Hit Two Disperse'. The words 'Two Disperse' (一打二散) indicated that if using it to hit a rock, the rock would be broken into pieces which would then disperse, and if using it to hit a person, that person would become so frightened that their soul would leave their body and disperse. This palm technique only had one stance because the palm force was too powerful, and hence when facing the enemy, there would be no need to use the second stance as the enemy would already be killed by the first stance. But because this one palm stance used such an extremely powerful internal energy as the basis, if a user of it wanted to change the stance or switch to a different one, they would not be able to do so. Astoundingly, after Qiao Feng had taken this stance, not only had he not dropped dead on the spot, he had also recovered in a very short period of time then jumped onto the roof while carrying a person and run away.

Xuan Nan sighed and said: 'This man's martial arts are really outstanding!' Xuan Ji said: 'We must eliminate him as soon as possible to prevent him from becoming an extremely great danger.' Xuan Nan continuously nodded. But Abbot Xuan Ci looked at the horizon in the path in which Qiao Feng had just left, entranced.

Just before running away, Qiao Feng had turned his head around and cast a glance, only seeing that the copper mirror had been broken into dozens of pieces, which had scattered on the ground, by that punch of Abbot Xuan Ci. His back had been reflected in every piece. Qiao Feng had again been startled without a reason: 'Why do I always feel uneasy every time I have a view of my own back? In the end what's unusual about this?' In that moment, he had been eager to get away from Shaolin, and hence even though this suspicion had appeared in his mind, when hurriedly rushing away, he had also forgotten it.

As he was extremely familiar with the paths at Mt. Shaoshi, he fled to the back of the mountain and chose precipitous narrow tracks to go along. After running away quickly for several li's (0.5 km), hearing no Shaolin monk chasing him, he felt a little bit calmer. He then put Zhi Qing down on the ground and shouted loudly: 'Walk by yourself! But don't think about escaping.' Inexplicably, when Zhi Qing's feet touched the ground, he immediately became weak, paralyzed and exhausted. He then curled up into a heap, looking as if he was already dead. Startled, Qiao Feng stretched out his hand to check Zhi Qing's breathing, only feeling that his breathing was unclear and extremely weak. When he checked his pulse next, he also found that it was beating extremely slowly. It seemed he was going to die very soon.

Qiao Feng thought: 'There're countless doubts and suspicions in my mind that I'm going to ask you about. I mustn't let you die so easily like this. After falling into my hands, this monk fears that his schemes would be exposed

so he has proly taken a fierce poison to kill himself.' He then held out his hand to touch Zhi Qing's chest and check the monk's heartbeat, only to feel that his hand was touching something pliant. This monk was amazingly a female!

Qiao Feng hastily withdrew his hand. He felt more and more strange: 'He... He's a female in disguise?' In the dark he was unable to examine carefully the appearance of this person. Unlike Duan Yu, who liked to read books, was familiar with decencies and had a lot of scruples, he was an open-minded tolerant man and did not stick to trivial matters, therefore he held Zhi Qing's back, lifted him up and shouted: 'Are you male or female? If you don't tell the truth, I'm gonna undress you to find out about it!' Zhi Qing's lips made a few movements. He wanted to say but was unable to utter any sound at all. Obviously he was at his last gasp and his life was hanging by a thread.

Qiao Feng thought: 'Regardless of whether this person is male or female, good or bad, I mustn't let him die at this point.' He held out his right palm, putting it on Zhi Qing's back. He then circulated his internal energy in his dantian (the point which is located ~ five cm below the navel), channeled it from his abdomen into his arm, from his arm into his palm and transferred it into Zhi Qing's body. Even if he was unable to save his life, at least he also needed to ask and get some clues from him. Before long, Zhi Qing's pulse gradually became stronger, and his breathing was also getting smoother. Seeing that he was unable to die at the moment, Qiao Feng was somewhat relieved and thought: 'This place isn't far from Shaolin. I can't stay here for too long.' He immediately bent his arms to carry Zhi Qing horizontally in them and strode westwards.

At this moment, he again felt that Zhi Qing's body was very light, which was out of proportion to his tall and big stature. He thought: 'It's not proper for me to remove your clothes, but don't tell me that I can't take off your footwear?' He then stretched out his hand and pulled the Buddhist

shoe off his right foot. When he pinched his sole, he only felt that his hand was touching something solid. Obviously it was not human flesh. He slightly pulled it with force. Following his hand, an object fell away, which turned out to be a wooden false foot. Only when he touched Zhi Qing's foot once more was it a soft delicate sole. Qiao Feng uttered a 'humph' sound and murmured: 'This person's really a female.'

He immediately used his lightness skill and went faster and faster. Running quickly until dawn, estimating that he was already more than fifty li's (0.5 km) away from Shaolin Monastery, he carried Zhi Qing into a grove on the right-hand side. Seeing a clear brook, which ran through the grove, he went to the side of it, scooped up some clear water and splashed it on Zhi Qing's face. Then he used the sleeve of her Buddhist robe to give her face a few wipes. All of a sudden, the flesh on her face fell down piece after piece. Qiao Feng was frightened and jumped to his feet: 'Why is her skin rotten like this?' Looking carefully with his doubtful eyes, he saw that under the rotten flesh on her face the smooth translucent skin was exposed.

Being carried in Qiao Feng's arms while he had been running, Zhi Qing had always been in a daze. At this moment, after her face had been wet by clear water, she opened her eyes, looked at Qiao Feng, forced a smile and softly said: 'Chief Qiao!' But because she was too weak, after uttering these words, she closed her eyes again.

Seeing that her face had different colors and was uneven, making it unable for him to see her real face clearly, Qiao Feng soaked the sleeve of her Buddhist robe in the brook until it was drenching then used force to swab her face several times with it. The gray dust continuously fell down under his hand, exposing the dainty face of a young girl. Qiao Feng could not refrain from shouting out: 'It's Ms. A'Zhu!'

The person who had disguised as Zhi Qing and blended in with the monks at the Bodhi Institute was no one other than Murong Fu's maid A'Zhu. Her disguising and making-up skills were really unmatched. She had walked on wooden feet to make her body look taller, used cotton to make her shoulders look higher and her abdomen curve outwards, used flour to make her cheeks look puffy, worn a Buddhist hat, and put on a Buddhist robe. Even the people who met Zhi Qing daily such as Zhi Zhan and Zhi Yuan had not been able to discover that she had been the fake one.

When feeling confused and not being able to think clearly, she heard Qiao Feng call her 'Ms. A'Zhu'. She wanted to reply and explain why she had sneaked in Shaolin Monastery, but she had no strength at all. Her tongue did not obey her orders either, therefore she could not even reply with a 'yes' sound.

Qiao Feng at first had firmly believed that Zhi Qing had been treacherous and vicious, and that the deaths of his father and mother must have had an enormous connection with him, hence he had not hesitated to spend his internal energy to save his life, wanting to investigate him and bring to light all the true facts. He had resolved that if Zhi Qing will not talk, he would use all kinds of cruel unendurable tortures to force him to say the truth. Who could have expected that this person's true identity was the young girl A'Zhu, who was dainty, clever, lovely and delightful? Really, no one could have expected this, even in a dream. Even though Qiao Feng had met A'Zhu and A'Bi a few times, and had saved the two of them from the hands of Western Xia warriors, he did not know that A'Zhu was very proficient at making-up. If Duan Yu had switched with Qiao Feng, he would have already guessed correctly.

At this moment Qiao Feng already knew clearly that she was not poisoned, but was injured by palm force. After considering a little, he already knew the reason. Before Abbot Xuan Ci had sent out an Air Splitting Palm attack, he

had used the copper mirror to cover his back. Even though the attack had not hit A'Zhu, because he had been carrying her in his left hand, the extremely swift and fierce palm force had transferred to her body as a result. After understanding this matter, he could not help feeling sorry inwardly: 'If I hadn't meddled in other people's affairs, letting her come and go as she pleases, she would've already escaped and definitely wouldn't have met with this disaster.' He had a very high opinion of Murong Fu, and as they said, if a person liked someone they would like even his house and the crow on the roof of his house (the English equivalent of this proverb is 'Love me, love my dog', but 'dog' gives a negative connotation in a Chinese context, so I don't use it here), therefore it was unavoidable that Qiao Feng also respected Murong Fu's maid. He thought: 'She suffered this serious injury all because of me. My sense of honor doesn't allow me not to cure her. I must go to a town and ask a doctor to treat her.' He then said: 'Ms. A'Zhu, I'm gonna carry you to a town to treat your injury.' A'Zhu said: 'There's vulnerary in my bosom.' As she finished saying she moved her right hand, but did not have any strength to reach into her bosom.

Qiao Feng stretched out his hand and took out all the things in her bosom. Besides some pieces of silver, he saw a gold lock which was very finely crafted. On the lock, two lines of small characters were engraved: 'Stars in the sky, which are twinkling, will glitter forever, and forever well will you be.' (星星, 闪烁, 永恒, 永恒 - There's a hidden message in this poem, I'll explain in a later chapter) In addition, there was a small case made of white jade, which had been given to her by Grandpa Tan in the apricot forest. Qiao Feng felt happy as he knew this vulnerary was highly effective. He said: 'Saving your life is important, please forgive me.' Holding out his hands, he unfastened her gown then repeatedly applied all the Cold Jade Icy Toad Ointment in the case onto her chest. A'Zhu could not refrain from getting

embarrassed. She felt a sharp pain in the injury again and passed out immediately.

Qiao Feng fastened her gown and put the white jade case and the gold lock back into her bosom, but he took the silver pieces. He then stretched out his hand to grab her body and walked quickly towards the north.

After going for more than twenty li's (0.5 km) he arrived in a densely populated big town called Xu Jia Ji. Qiao Feng went to the biggest inn and booked two rooms. He then helped A'Zhu settle down and invited a doctor to come and examine the condition of her injury.

That doctor felt A'Zhu's pulse then continuously shook his head and said: 'The lady's illness is incurable. This prescription is merely the best I can do. That's all.' Qiao Feng saw that the prescription had some licorice, peppermint, Chinese bellflower, pinellia ternata, all of which were mild medicines which might not necessarily be able to cure even a common stomach ache.

He did not go buy the medicines either and thought: 'If even the effective medicine of Grandpa Tan of Chongxiao Cave can't cure her then what's the use of the medicines of a quack in this town?' He then channeled his internal energy and transferred it into her body. In an instant, A'Zhu's face became ruddy. She said: 'Chief Qiao, luckily you saved me. Had I fallen into the hands of those bald thieves, my life would've been threatened.' Hearing she talk with abundant energy, Qiao Feng was very happy and said: 'Ms. A'Zhu, I was really worried that you wouldn't be able to get well.' A'Zhu said: 'Don't call me Miss or something. Calling me A'Zhu straight out is okay. Chief Qiao, why did you come to Shaolin Monastery?' Qiao Feng said: 'I'm no longer a chief already. Later on don't call me Chief...' A'Zhu said: 'Oh, I'm sorry. I'm gonna call you Great Master Qiao.'

Qiao Feng said: 'Let me ask you first. Why did you come to Shaolin Monastery?' A'Zhu laughed and said: 'Oh, speaking of that, please don't laugh at me for playing the

goat. I heard that our young master had come to Shaolin Monastery so I wanted to find him and talked to him about Ms. Wang. Who would've known that when I just entered the monastery, that monk Zhi Qing, who was on guard at the main entrance, aggressively said that women couldn't enter Shaolin Monastery? I had a quarrel with him. He instead scolded me. But I wanted to come in, thus I also disguised as him, to see what he could do.'

Qiao Feng smiled and said: 'You disguised, made up, and in the end entered Shaolin Monastery. Those monks couldn't discover that you're female at all. It'd have been better if after entering you had let them see your true appearance. They would've exploded in their bellies with anger without being able to do anything to you.' At first he had greatly respected Shaolin Monastery, but he could not help feeling angry because, firstly, Xuan Ku were already dead, and secondly, the monks had wrongly accused him of the three most serious crimes under heaven, which were patricide, matricide and killing his master, without asking about the rights and wrongs of him.

A'Zhu sat up, clapped her hands, laughed and said: 'Great Master Qiao, that's a good idea. After I get well, I'll disguise as a man to enter the monastery then change to female clothes, swagger to the middle of the Great Mighty Sanctum and sit there, making all the monks so angry that they would roll on the floor. How interesting would that be! Ah...' Suddenly, she could not take even a breath. Her body then loosened and collapsed. She lay motionless on the bed.

Qiao Feng was startled. He put his forefinger next to her nostrils and felt that her breathing seemed to have completely stopped. Feeling anxious, he hastily put his palm on the 'Lingtai acupuncture point' on her back and sent his internal energy into her body. Within the time to finish a cup of tea, A'Zhu slowly turned her body over, laughed apologetically and said: 'A'yo, why did I fall asleep during conversation? Great Master Qiao, I'm really sorry.' Qiao Feng

knew that her condition was far from good. He said: 'You haven't recovered yet. You'd better sleep for a while to rest.' A'Zhu said: 'I'm not tired, but you've been busy for half a night, so please rest for a while.' Qiao Feng said: 'Okay, I'll see you after a while.'

He went to the parlor to order five Jin's of wine and two Jin's of beef (1 Jin = 0.6 kg) then ate and drank alone. Because at this moment he felt very sad, it was easy for him to get drunk. After drinking up five Jin's of wine, he unexpectedly felt slightly intoxicated. He then took two steamed buns to A'Zhu's room for her to eat. After he entered the room, he called several times but did not hear any reply. He went to the bed and saw that her eyes were slightly closed and her cheeks were sunken. It looked like she was already dead. He stretched out his hand and touched her forehead. Fortunately it was still warm. He then hastily used his internal energy to save her. A'Zhu slowly woke up. She received the buns and happily ate them.

This time, Qiao Feng knew that she was now totally depending on his internal energy to stay alive, if he did not transfer internal energy into her body, she would be exhausted within two hours and die. He did not know what he should do.

Seeing that he was having a thoughtful and worried look, A'Zhu said: 'Great Master Qiao, am I so seriously injured that even the effective medicine of Sir Tan can't cure me?' Qiao Feng hastily said: 'No, no! It's nothing, after several days, you'll get well.' A'Zhu said: 'Please don't deceive me. I myself know it. I only feel empty, not having even the least bit of strength.' Qiao Feng said: 'Set your mind at rest and recover. I'll surely have a way to cure you.' Hearing his tone, A'Zhu knew that her injury was really serious therefore she could not help but get scared and her hand started to tremble. The bun half of which she had eaten then fell on the floor. Qiao Feng only thought that her internal energy

had run out again, hence he immediately put his palm on her Lingtai acupuncture point.

At this moment, A'Zhu was still in full possession of all her faculties, she felt a warm stream of internal energy being channeled into her body from his palm and her whole body instantly felt comfortable. After thinking a little, she already understood that actually she had almost died for several times and every time Qiao Feng had used his internal energy to bring her back to life, hence she felt both grateful to him and frightened. Even though she was clever, after all she was still very young. With tears streaming down, she said: 'Great Master Qiao, I don't wanna die, please don't ignore and leave me behind in here.'

Finding her words pitiable, Qiao Feng consoled her: 'That's definitely impossible. Don't worry. What kind of man is Qiao Feng? How can I abandon a friend who's in jeopardy?' A'Zhu said: 'I don't deserve to be your friend. Great Master Qiao, am I gonna die? After a person die will they become a ghost?' Qiao Feng said: 'You don't need to think too much. You're so young like this, suffering a bit of minor injury, how could you die?' A'Zhu said: 'You're not fobbing me off, are you?' Qiao Feng said: 'No, I'm not.' A'Zhu said: 'You're a well-known hero in wulin. They all say: 'North Qiao Feng, South Murong', you and my young master, one in the north, one in the south, are equally famous. In your life, have you ever failed to keep your words?' Qiao Feng smiled and said: 'When I was little I often lied, but afterward, when traveling in jianghu, I no longer deceived other people.' A'Zhu said: 'You said the condition of my injury wasn't serious. It's deceiving me, isn't it?'

Qiao Feng thought: 'If you know that the condition of your injury is serious, you'll be anxious, making it harder to save you. Because of you I have no choice but to deceive you.' He then said: 'I can't deceive you.' A'Zhu let out a sigh and said: 'Okay, I feel at ease then. Great Master Qiao, I have one matter to beg you.' Qiao Feng asked: 'What's the

matter?' A'Zhu said: 'Tonight you stay in my room with me, and don't leave me.' She thought if Qiao Feng went away this time, she herself would possibly not be able to endure till dawn. Qiao Feng said: 'Very good. Even if you hadn't said that, I'd still sit here with you. Don't say anymore, just sleep quietly for a while.'

A'Zhu closed her eyes, but after a while, she opened them again and said: 'Great Master Qiao, I can't sleep. I beg you one thing, is that okay?' Qiao Feng asked: 'What is it?' A'Zhu said: 'When I was little, every time I couldn't sleep my mother would sing for me to hear at the side of my bed. She would only need to sing three songs, I'd then sleep soundly.' Qiao Feng smiled and said: 'It's not easy to find your mother now.' A'Zhu let out a sigh and said quietly: 'I don't know where my father and mother are. I don't know if they still live in this world either. Great Master Qiao, you sing a few songs for me to hear, is that okay?'

Qiao Feng could not help but smile bitterly. He was such a mighty man therefore if he sang to coax a young girl to sleep, this would really be outrageous. He then said: 'I really can't sing.' A'Zhu said: 'When you were little, your mother sang songs to you, didn't she?' Scratching his head, Qiao Feng said: 'That seems to have happened, but I already forgot everything. Even if I remembered I wouldn't be able to sing.' A'Zhu sighed and said: 'If you're unwilling to sing then I can't do anything about it.' Qiao Feng said apologetically: 'It's not that I'm unwilling to sing, but I really can't sing.' A'Zhu suddenly came up with another idea. She clapped her hands, laughed and said: 'Ah, I got it, Great Master Qiao, I beg you another matter, this time you can't say no.'

Qiao Feng felt this young girl was innocent and simple, but her words and behavior were often beyond people's expectations. After she had said she would ask him for another thing, he had no idea what whimsical thing it would be. Hence, he said: 'You say it first. If I can promise then I'll

promise. If I can't promise then I won't promise.' A'Zhu said: 'This matter, everyone in the world can do, as long as they are at least four or five years old. You think it's easy or not?' Not wanting to be fooled, Qiao Feng said: 'In the end, what is it? You gotta say it clearly first.' A'Zhu gave a charming smile and said: 'Alright! Please tell several tales to me, it doesn't matter if they're about a rabbit gege (elder bro) or a wolf popo (husband's mother/grandmother), I'll always be able to fall asleep.'

Qiao Feng frowned. An awkward expression appeared on his face. Not long ago, he had still been the Chief of the number one large society in jianghu who had had great might and been in charge of extraordinary people. But during the past few days, he had been dismissed from the Chief post and expelled from the Society. The three dearest people to him, who were his parents and master, had passed away in one day. In addition, he did not know if he was a Human or a Han man, his origin was unclear, and yet he was bearing the three heinous crimes which were betrayal and murdering his parents. After receiving such blows one after another, of course he had no one to share his worries, but who could have expected that, at this inn, he would have to keep a young girl company and would be asked to sing and tell tales by her like this? In the past, had he heard only half a sentence regarding these kinds of mushy trivialities, he would have covered his ears and run away quickly. In his life, he had only liked drinking wine and betting with his brothers and speaking loudly and openly. Besides engaging in carousals, he had only talked about serious national affairs and military affairs, and about heroes in the world. Those things such as telling a tale, a rabbit gege and a wolf popo were really jokes and absurdities to him.

However, in a glance, seeing that there was an earnest expectant look in A'Zhu's eyes and that her face was haggard, he thought: 'Suffering such a serious injury, it's perhaps already hard for her to recover. If she couldn't take

a breath, she would die at any moment. She wants to hear a tale then I'll conveniently tell her one.' He then said: 'Okay, I'm gonna tell you a tale. But I'm afraid you'll think that it's not good.'

A'Zhu was very happy. She said: 'It'll definitely be interesting. Please tell me quickly.'

Even though Qiao Feng had agreed to tell a tale, he really did not know what to tell. Only after a while did he say: 'Hum, I'm gonna tell a tale of a wolf. Once upon a time, there was an old man. While walking in the mountains, he saw a wolf which had been tied up by men and put into a cloth bag. That wolf begged him to set it free. The old man then untied the cloth bag and released the wolf. The wolf...' A'Zhu continued: 'The wolf said it was hungry and wanted to eat the old man, right?' Qiao Feng: 'Oh, so you've already heard this tale?' A'Zhu said: 'This is the tale of a wolf in the mountains. I don't like to hear the stories in books. I want you to talk about the countryside, and not the stories written in books.'

Qiao Feng considered and said: 'Not a story written in books but a story in the countryside. Okay, I'm gonna tell you a story of a country kid.'

'A long long time ago, there was a poor family in the mountains. The father and the mother had only one child. When that child turned seven, his body was very tall and big, and he could already help his father chop firewood in the mountains. One day, the father got sick, but because their family was very poor, they couldn't afford to invite a doctor or buy medicine. But the father's illness got more serious with each passing day. Not using medicine was out of the question. So, the mother took the only six hens and a basket of eggs of the family to the market and sold them.'

'The hens and the eggs were sold for four silver qian (1 qian = 1/10 tael = ~ four g). But the doctor said it was too far to go into the mountains and he didn't want to see the patient. The mother made every effort to beg him, but that

doctor always shook his head and refused. The mother then knelt down and begged him sincerely. The doctor said: 'Going to your house in the mountains to see the patient isn't worth the trouble of being affected by the miasma and the poverty. What illness can your four silver qian cure?' The mother then pulled a corner of his gown. The doctor used his strength to pull free. Unintentionally, the mother was grabbing too tight, therefore, with a 'chi' sound, a long seam was torn in the gown. The doctor was very angry so he pushed the mother down on the floor then threw a heavy kick at her. He also pulled her and demanded that she pay for the damage to the gown, saying that this gown was newly made and that it was worth two silver taels.'

Hearing him say to here, A'Zhu softly said: 'This doctor really was too despicable.'

Qiao Feng raised his head, looking at the twilight, which was gradually getting dark, through the window, and slowly said: 'That child was at the mother's side. Seeing the mother being bullied, he rushed forwards then both hit and bit the doctor. But he was just a little child, what strength did he have? So, he was lifted up by the doctor and thrown out through the main door. The mother hastily went outside to take care of the child. The doctor was afraid that the woman would pester him again so he shut the door. The child's forehead hit a stone and bled a lot. The mother was afraid of having problems so she didn't dare to stay in front of the doctor's house. She only wept and pulled the child's hand to go home.'

'When that child went by an ironware shop, he saw several sharp knives which were used for killing pigs and cattle being put on the stall. The blacksmith was very busy inviting customers to buy plows, rakes and hoes so the child stole a knife and hid it in his body. Even the mother didn't see that.'

'After they got home, the mother didn't tell the father about what had happened as she was afraid that the father

would get angry and his illness would become more serious. She wanted to take out the four silver qian to hand over to the father, but to her surprise, when she reached into her bosom, she didn't find any silver.'

'The mother both panicked and found this strange. When she went outside to ask the child, she saw that he was holding a shining new knife and sharpening it by rubbing it against a stone. The mother asked him: 'Where did you get the knife from?' The child didn't dare to say that he'd stolen it so he lied: 'Other people gave it to me.' The mother of course didn't believe it. At the market, a new sharp knife like this had to be sold for one and a half qian or two qian of silver, how could someone casually give it to a child? She asked who gave it to him, but that child couldn't answer. The mother sighed and said: 'Son, dad and mom are poor so normally we can't buy you any toy. We've really wronged you. You've bought the knife to play, to boys, there's nothing wrong with this. But you give mom the remaining money. Dad is sick, so we'll buy a Jin (~ 600 g) of meat and simmer a soup for him to eat.' As soon as the child heard that, he goggled and asked: 'What remaining money?' The mother said: 'Our four Qian (~ four g) of silver, you took them and bought the knife, didn't you?' The child was anxious and cried out: 'I didn't take the money, I didn't take the money.' The father and the mother had never smacked or scolded him. Even though he was just a several year old child, they'd treated him like a guest and always been polite to him...'

Telling to here, Qiao Feng suddenly shivered with fear: 'Why was it like this? Parents in the world never treat their children like this. Even if they spoil or take a pity on their children, they definitely can't respect them and be polite like this.' He talked to himself: 'Why was it so strange like this?'

A'Zhu asked: 'What was strange?' When she said the last two words, her breath was already feeble like a silk thread.

Qiao Feng knew the internal energy in her body had exhausted. He immediately pressed his palm on her back and sent internal energy into her body.

A'Zhu gradually regained her energy. She sighed and said: 'Great Master Qiao, every time you transfer energy to me, your internal energy decreases. To martial arts practitioners, internal energy is the most important thing. You treat me like this, how can A'Zhu... repay you?' Qiao Feng laughed and said: 'So, I only need to breathe in meditation for several shichen (1 shichen = two hours) then not only will my internal energy be restored but I'll also be able to talk about repaying? I and your master, Mr. Murong, have a deep telepathic friendship despite being thousands of li (0.5 km) apart. Even though we've never met, I always regard him as a friend. You're a member of his family, why do you need to regard me as an outsider?' A'Zhu said sadly: 'My energy will gradually disappear in every two hours. You can't... you can't forever...' Qiao Feng said: 'Don't worry. We can always find a doctor with brilliant medical knowledge to treat your injury.'

A'Zhu smiled and said: 'I'm afraid that doctor would hate me for being poor and fear that he would be affected by miasma and poverty so that he wouldn't treat me. Great Master Qiao, you haven't finished telling your story yet. What was so strange?'

Qiao Feng said: 'Oh, it was just a slip of the tongue. Seeing that the child didn't admit, the mother didn't say anymore either. She went back into the house. After a while, when the child finished sharpening the knife, he came into the house. He heard the mother talking in a low voice to the father that he himself had stolen money and bought a knife but was unwilling to admit. His father said: 'Ever since staying with us, this child hasn't got any toy. If he wants something then let him be. We've rather wronged him all along.' When the two of them talked to here they saw the child enter the house and stopped talking. With a kind and

pleasant expression, the father patted his head and said: 'Poppet, later on watch your step, how could you fall and have your head so badly injured?' As for the missing four qian of silver and the matter of him buying a new knife, the father didn't mention a single sentence. He didn't even have the least bit of an unhappy expression.'

'Even though the child was only seven, he was already very sensible. He thought: 'Dad and mom suspect me of stealing money to buy the knife, if they gave me a good beating or a good scolding, I wouldn't mind at all. But unluckily they still treat me this well.' He felt uneasy so he said to his father: 'Dad, I didn't steal the money. I didn't buy this knife either.' The father said: 'Your mom is meddlesome. What's so urgent about the missing money? Why questioned and made a fuss? Women are just small-minded. Good child, does your head hurt?' The child had no choice but to answer: 'I'm still fine!' He wanted to offer an explanation but had no way to argue. He was sulky and skipped the dinner to go to bed.'

'He tossed and turned in bed and couldn't fall asleep. He heard the mother softly crying. He thought it was because she was worried that the father's illness was serious and also felt angry about being insulted and beaten by the doctor during the day. The child quietly got up then climbed out through the window. During the night, he rushed to the town and went to the outside of the doctor's house. The front door and back door of that house were tightly shut so there was no way to go inside. But the child's body was small, so he crept into the house through the dog hole. He saw lamplight passing through the paper of a room's window. The doctor hadn't gone to bed yet and was decocting medicine. The child pushed the door of the room open...'

Feeling worried about that child, A'Zhu said: 'This child entered other people's house at night. Perhaps he was gonna be in big trouble.'

Qiao Feng shook his head and said: 'No. Hearing the sound of the door opening, the doctor raised his head and asked: 'Who?' The child didn't say anything. He came near him, drew the sharp knife and gave a thrust. His body was short so this thrust pierced the doctor's belly. That doctor could only groan with several 'hum' sounds then fell down.'

A'Zhu uttered an 'Ah' sound and said in a shocked voice: 'This child stabbed dead the doctor?'

Qiao Feng nodded and said: 'Correct. The child then crawled out through the dog hole again and returned home. In the night he made a round trip of several tens of li (0.5 km) so he was terribly tired. Only in the early morning of the next day did the family of the doctor find out that he was dead with his belly broken and his gut sticking out, looking very nasty. But all the front and back doors were still being locked tightly and were bolted from the inside, how could an outside murderer enter the house? Everyone suspected that people in the doctor's family had done this. The district chief (zhixian – Song dynasty's district-level top-ranking official) then tortured and investigated the doctor's brothers, wife and children, causing a disturbance for a few years, so the doctor's family was broken up. Since then, this incident has become a doubtful case in Xu Jia Ji.'

A'Zhu asked: 'You said Xu Jia Ji? Did that doctor... live in this town?'

Qiao Feng said: 'Yes. This doctor was surnamed Deng. At first he was the most famous doctor in this town. Even the several districts around knew about his reputation. His house was located to the west of the town. Originally it was surrounded by tall and big white walls, but now everything has been ruined. Just a moment ago, when I was going to invite the doctor to see your illness, I also went to the front of that house to have a look.'

A'Zhu asked: 'How about the sick father? Did he recover from the illness?' Qiao Feng said: 'Afterward, a monk from Shaolin Monastery brought medicine to their house and

cured his illness.' A'Zhu said: 'It turns out there're still good monks in Shaolin Monastery.' Qiao Feng said: 'Of course there are. Shaolin Monastery has several high monks that are benevolent and knightly. They really make other people revere them.' As he finished saying, he felt sad because he thought of his first enshi (kind master) Xuan Ku dashi.

A'Zhu let out an 'En' sound and muttered to herself: 'That doctor looked down on the poor and thought nothing of their lives. He was of course despicable, but his fault didn't deserve death. This child was also too barbaric. I really can't believe this, how could a seven year old child dare to kill a person? Ah, Great Master Qiao, you said this was a tale and not true, right?' Qiao Feng said: 'It's a real incident.' A'Zhu let out a sigh and said softly: 'This kind of cruel child seems like a Khitan villain!'

Qiao Feng suddenly trembled all over. He jumped to his feet and said: 'You... What did you say?'

Seeing that his face had changed color, A'Zhu was scared and suddenly understood everything. She said: 'Great Master Qiao, Great Master Qiao, I'm sorry, I... I didn't mean to hurt you with words. I really didn't say it on purpose...' Qiao Feng stood in a state of shock for a short while then sat down dispiritedly and said: 'You already guessed it?' A'Zhu nodded. Qiao Feng said: 'Words that are said unconsciously are often sincere words. I acted without mercy like this, was it really because of the Khitan origin?' A'Zhu gently said: 'Great Master Qiao, A'Zhu talked nonsense. You don't need to think about it. That doctor kicked your mother and you've been heroic and righteous since childhood so there's nothing odd about you killing him.'

Qiao Feng hugged his head with his hands and said: 'It wasn't merely because of him kicking my mother. It was also because he made me face a false accusation. My mother's four silver qian must've fallen on the floor during the struggle in the doctor's house. I... In my life, what I can't stand the most is being wrongly accused by other people.'

However, within this day he had suffered three great injustices. He was unable to know if he himself was a Khitan, but Qiao Sanhuai and wife and Xuan Ku dashi obviously were not murdered by him, yet the three heinous crimes which were patricide, matricide and killing his master all had been put on his head. In the end, who was the murderer? Who shifted the blame onto him like this?

At this moment, Qiao Feng thought about another matter: 'Why did dad and mom both say that I was treated unfairly by staying with them? If the parents are poor, the child naturally will be poor, why is there anything fair or unfair about that? Perhaps I'm not their real son, but someone entrusted me to them. Most prolly the person who put me into their fosterage has a very high status, that's why dad and mom were very polite to me. Not only being polite, they also respected me deeply. Who was the person that entrusted me to them? Prolly it was Chief Wang.' His parents had treated him completely differently than how normal parents treated their children. As he was astute, he should have been aware of this long ago, but because it had been like that since childhood, he was accustomed to it. Even a more astute person would not have been able to figure them out as they would only think that his parents had been particularly benign. At this moment, when considering, he felt that everything confirmed that he himself was a Khitan barbarian.

A'Zhu consoled him: 'Great Master Qiao, they say you're Khitan but in my opinion they're definitely slandering and starting a rumor. Needless to say, you're kind-hearted, righteous and well-known in the whole world. To just a negligible little maid like me, you've also watched over with all your heart. Khitan people are cruel like tigers and wolves. You're like the sky and they're like the earth, how can they compare with you?'

Qiao Feng said: 'A'Zhu, if I'm really a Khitan, will you still let me watch over you?'

At that time Han people in Central Plains detested Khitan people and regarded them as poisonous serpents and ferocious beasts, hence A'Zhu was startled. She then said: 'Don't let your imagination run away with you. That's definitely impossible. If the Khitan ethnic group can produce such a good person like you then we won't detest Khitan people.'

Qiao Feng did not say anything and thought: 'If I'm really a Khitan then even such a little maid like A'Zhu won't pay attention to me.' In an instant, he felt that even though the world was big, he himself had nowhere to take shelter. His thoughts surged up like tidewater and his chest burned with righteous indignation. He knew that because he had transferred energy to A'Zhu repeatedly, his internal energy had been spent quite a lot. Without delay, he sat cross-legged on a chair beside the bed then slowly breathed and channeled his internal energy.

A'Zhu also closed her eyes.

Chapter 19: I'll Go, Despite a Myriad of Foes

Fan translation by forgot password and Moinllieon [Second Edition]

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Qiao Feng channeled his internal energy for a long time. Suddenly, he heard two soft 'ge-ge' sounds high above in the northwest corner. He knew that there was a person in wulin walking on the roof. After that, there were also two sounds up in the southeast corner. When hearing the sounds in the northwest, Qiao Feng had still not paid any attention to them, but when there were two people gathering together like this, he knew it was likely they had come because of him. He lowered his voice and said to A'Zhu: 'I go out for a while and will come back immediately, don't be afraid.' A'Zhu nodded. Qiao Feng did not blow out the candle. As the door of the room was half closed, he turned his body sideways and went out. He then went around to the window at the backyard and stood next to the wall.

He only heard someone say in a room in the east of the inn: 'Is that Eight Master Xiang? Please come down.' The man on the northwest corner laughed and said: 'Qi the Sixth of Guanxi has also arrived.' The man in the room said: 'Very good, very good! Please come in together.' Two people jumped down from the roof in succession and walked into the room.

Qiao Feng thought: 'Qi the Sixth of Guanxi is called 'Fast Saber Qi Liu' (Liu = Six). He's a famous brave man in Guanxi. That Eight Master Xiang is most proddy Xiang Wanghai of Xiangdong. I've heard that these people are generous in aiding the needy and their martial arts are remarkable. These two people aren't the treacherous vicious

type and have no dispute with me either. Definitely they've come here not because of me. It turns out I've had a silly suspicion. The voice of the man in the room sounds somewhat familiar, but who is he?'

He heard Xiang Wanghai say: "Yama's Foe' Divine Doctor Xue suddenly sends out hero invitation cards to invite every fellow in jianghu, the situation is also very urgent because it says 'To the hero who sees this card, your esteemed presence is requested.' Big brother Bao, do you know what this is for?'

When Qiao Feng heard the words 'Yama's Foe Divine Doctor Xue', he immediately had a mixed feeling of happiness and fright: 'Divine Doctor Xue is around here? I only knew that he was far away in Ganzhou. If he is around here, the little maid A'Zhu can be saved.'

He had heard that Divine Doctor Xue was the number one wizard in medical circles nowadays. Because the two words 'Divine Doctor' were too famous, everyone did not even know what his original real name was. The tales of him in jianghu were even more exaggerating, saying that he could even bring the dead back to life, as for the people who were alive, no matter how serious the injuries or illnesses they suffered were, he always had methods to cure them, and for this reason Yama of Hell also had a serious headache as every time he sent Wuchang little demons to capture people, Divine Doctor Xue would often stay at the side and thwart them or block the way and snatch the people. Not only did Divine Doctor Xue have godlike medical knowledge, his martial arts were also outstanding. He liked making friends with fellows in jianghu. When he cured a person of an illness, he often consulted them about one martial arts stance or two. The person involved felt grateful to him for saving their life therefore naturally they would not hold back anything when passing on their knowledge and only teach him their proudest skills.

He heard Fast Saber Qi Liu ask: 'Shopkeeper Bao, recently have you bought or sold something good?' Qiao Feng thought: 'No wonder the voice of the man in the room sounds familiar. It turns out he's 'No Capital' Bao Qianling. This man robs the rich to aid the poor. He has quite a heroic reputation. That year, when I assumed the Beggar Society's Chief post, he also participated in the ceremony.'

Already knowing that there were three people Xiang Wanghai, Qi Liu and Bao Qianling in the room, he did not want to hear other people's private matters and thought: 'Tomorrow morning I'll visit Bao Qianling's room and ask him about where Divine Doctor Xue is staying.' When he was about to return to A'Zhu's room, suddenly he heard Bao Qianling sighed and said: 'Oh, for the past several days I've been in a very bad mood and uninterested in buying or selling. Today, hearing that he killed his father, mother and master, I was even more furious.' As he finished saying he stretched out his hand and gave the table a heavy slap.

When Qiao Feng heard the words 'killed his father, mother, and master', he was scared: 'They're talking about me.'

Xiang Wanghai said: 'This Qiao Feng guy has always had a big reputation and been hypocritical. Not just a few people have been fooled by him. Who would have expected he could commit monstrous crimes like this?' Bao Qianling said: 'That year, when he assumed the Beggar Society's Chief post, I and he also had a chance to meet each other. I've always totally admired the conduct of this man in the past. Hearing Zhao the Third say he belonged to the Khitan barbaric ethnic group, I still tried my best to argue that he didn't, for this reason I and Zhao the Third quarreled to the point that we turned purple with rage and almost had a fight with each other. Oh, barbaric people really are the same as animals. He could hide it for a period of time, but later on, the ferocious character eventually broke open.' Qi Liu said: 'Who could have expected that he has roots in Shaolin

Monastery? Xuan Ku dashi was his master.’ Bao Qianling said: ‘This matter at first was very secret. Even in Shaolin School, very few people knew about it. But Qiao Feng already killed his master so Shaolin School can no longer conceal the truth. This Qiao surnamed vicious traitor only thought that after killing his father, mother and master he’d be able to hide his origin and he’d rather die than admit it to anyone. But he couldn’t have expected that he would overreach himself and his sins would become more and more serious.’

Standing outside the door, hearing Bao Qianling assessing his mind like this, Qiao Feng thought: “No Capital’ Bao Qianling and I can be regarded as having some friendship. This man is definitely not the type to make irresponsible remarks. If even he is saying like this, of course other people’s words are even more unbearable. Oh, I, Qiao Feng, have suffered this unjustifiable injustice, why should I bother clearing myself of it? From now on I’ll just conceal my identity, more than ten years later, friends in jianghu would all forget that there’s a person like me, that’s all.’ In an instant, he could not help but feeling utterly disheartened.

He heard Xiang Wanghai continue: ‘My guess is that Divine Doctor Xue sends out hero invitation cards to confer with other people about how to deal with Qiao Feng. This ‘Yama’s Foe’ hates evil like an enemy, I’ve also heard that he and the two dashi Xuan Nan and Xuan Ji of Shaolin Monastery have a really deep friendship.’ Bao Qianling said: ‘Correct! I think recently in jianghu, besides Qiao Feng doing evil, there’s no other major affair. Brother Xiang, Brother Qi, come on, come on, come on, let’s drink up several Jin (600 g) of white spirit, tonight we’re gonna have a long talk.’

Qiao Feng thought even if they talked till dawn, they would merely make an extra effort to angrily scold him hence he did not want to hear anymore and returned to A’Zhu’s room immediately.

Seeing that his face was pale and was having a very ugly expression, A'Zhu asked: 'Great Master Qiao, did you meet enemies?' She was worried that he had suffered internal injuries. Qiao Feng shook his head. A'Zhu was still uneasy, she asked: 'You're not injured, right?'

Ever since Qiao Feng had started to step into jianghu, he had only been respected by friends and feared by enemies. He had never been despised and looked down upon like he had for the past several days. Hearing A'Zhu ask him so, he could not help but sense his pride rising. He said loudly: 'No, I'm not. It's not difficult for those ignorant narrow-minded lowlifes to defame and spread false rumors about me, but if they want to fight and injure me, it may not necessarily be easy.' Suddenly, heroic and mettlesome feelings surged up in his heart. He said: 'A'Zhu, tomorrow I'm gonna find the best doctor under heaven to treat the injury for you. Just relax and sleep.'

Seeing his proud expression, A'Zhu had a lot of respect and admiration for him but she was also scared. She felt that the man in front of her was totally different than Mr. Murong but they also had very many similarities as both of them did not fear Heaven and Hell, and were both prideful and majestic. But Qiao Feng was straightforward and heroic like a mighty lion, while Mr. Murong was refined and unaffected like a phoenix.

After making up his mind, Qiao Feng was no longer worried. He then fell asleep soon after sitting down on the chair.

A'Zhu saw the dim lamplight beaming on his face. After a while, she could hear him snoring. Suddenly, his facial muscles twitched slightly and he ground his teeth. The muscles on both sides of his square face stuck out. A'Zhu felt that the brawny man in front of her was very pitiable and really was much unhappier than she herself was.

Early in the morning of the next day, Qiao Feng transferred his internal energy to A'Zhu, paid the rent and

asked the inn attendant to go hire a mule wagon. He helped A'Zhu take a sit in the wagon then went to the outside of Bao Qianling's room and said loudly: 'Brother Bao, this little brother Qiao Feng pays a visit.'

After cursing Qiao Feng for half a night, the three people Bao Qianling, Xiang Wanghai and Qi Liu had been very tired and fallen asleep. At this moment they had not yet waken up. Suddenly hearing the shout by Qiao Feng, they were all frightened and immediately jumped out of the earthen bed simultaneously, taking out the saber, drawing the sword, and touching the whip. As soon as the three people held weapons in their hands, they were dumbfounded because they saw that there was a small piece of white paper on which four small words 'Qiao Feng paying respects' were written sticking to the weapon of each of them. The three people looked at each other, gasping with astonishment. They knew that the previous night Qiao Feng had played a trick on them, had he wanted to take their lives, it would have been as easy as turning his hand over. Among them, Bao Qianling was even more embarrassed as his nickname was 'No Capital'; he had gone to thousands of houses in the daytime and had broken through hundreds of doors at nighttime; leaping onto roofs, vaulting over walls and stealing other people's money were his best skills, yet during the night he had been played a prank on by Qiao Feng without knowing anything about it until now.

Bao Qianling wound the flexible whip back around his waist, knowing that if Qiao Feng had wanted to harm them he would have done it the night before. He immediately ran to the door and said: 'The head on Bao Qianling's neck, Brother Qiao can take it whenever you want to. I, Bao, specialize in doing business without capital, even if my entire home is lost at the hands of Brother Qiao, it's still nothing. You killed even your father, mother and master, and only have a nodding acquaintance with me, why should you show mercy to me?' As soon as he had seen the piece of

paper on his flexible whip, he had already made a decision. He knew the situation today was very dangerous, if he himself argued insolently with Qiao Feng to the end, there would really be no way to flee for his life; therefore it would be better to hand over himself to him.

Qiao Feng cupped his fist in his hand and said: 'Several years have flown by since the day we bid farewell to each other in Qingzhou prefecture in Shandong. Brother Bao's demeanor is still the same as before. This is really pleasing and commendable.' Bao Qianling ha-ha laughed and said: 'I've just been dragging out an ignoble life. Until now, on the whole, I haven't died yet.' Qiao Feng said: 'Hearing that 'Yama's Foe' Divine Doctor Xue has sent out hero invitation cards, I rather like to go to increase my knowledge. May I go with the three of you?'

Bao Qianling was astonished and thought: 'Divine Doctor Xue has sent out hero invitation cards only to deal with you. Having the nerve to go alone, you must be impatient not to live. In the end, what's your intention? I've long heard that Chief Qiao of the Beggar Society is bold but cautious, and both brave and resourceful. If it's not because he's secure in the knowledge that he has strong backing, he definitely won't hurl himself into the net. I mustn't fall into his trap.'

Seeing that he was hesitant about replying, Qiao Feng said: 'I have a matter to beg Divine Doctor Xue. Hopefully, Brother Bao will lead the way.'

Bao Qianling thought: 'I'm worried about not being able to escape from his murderous hands. If I lead him to the hero banquet, extraordinary people will jointly attack him, even if he had three heads and six arms, he would be hopelessly outnumbered. But going with him is really like facing an almost certain death.' Even though he was worried, he still thought that it would be good to lead Qiao Feng to the meeting of heroes, hence he said: 'This great banquet for heroes will be held at Juxian Manor which is seventy li (0.5 km) away to the northeast of here. Brother Qiao wants to go

there. This can't be better. But I'm gonna make it clear that, in the first place, this meeting isn't a nice meeting and this banquet isn't a nice banquet. If Brother Qiao goes there, it'll bode ill rather than well for you. Please don't blame Bao Qianling me for not telling you in advance.'

Qiao Feng smiled half-heartedly and said: 'I appreciate Brother Bao's good intentions. The hero banquet will be held at Juxian Manor so the organizers are the You Clan's two Heroes, aren't they? It's also easy to ask about the location of Juxian Manor so the three of you please go ahead. It won't be late if this little brother slowly goes two hours later. This will also allow time for everyone to prepare.'

Bao Qianling turned around and looked at Qi Liu and Xiang Wanghai. The two of them slowly nodded. Bao Qianling said: 'If so, the three of us will respectfully wait for Brother Qiao's arrival at Juxian Manor.'

The three people Bao, Qi and Xiang hurriedly paid the rent then got on their horses and whipped them towards Juxian Manor. They urged the horses on all the way and sometimes they turned their heads around to take a peep, fearing that Qiao Feng would suddenly ride a fast horse and catch up with them from the back. Fortunately, all along they did not see him. Bao Qianling was certainly a very clever person and Qi Liu and Xiang Wanghai were also extraordinary people in jianghu who had a lot of experience and extensive knowledge. But after the three of them discussed and made guesses on the way, they still could not understand what Qiao Feng's intentions were when he had said he would go to the hero banquet alone.

Qi Liu suddenly said: 'Big Brother Bao, did you see that big wagon beside Qiao Feng? I'm afraid there's something strange in it.' Xiang Wanghai said: 'Could it be that there's someone formidable hiding in the wagon?' Bao Qianling said: 'Even if the inside of the wagon was to be packed with people to the point that the air couldn't pass through, it'd only be possible to shove seven or eight people into it.'

Adding Qiao Feng, there'd still be less than ten people. If they go to the hero banquet, it'd be like a small boat going into the ocean. What would it be able to achieve?'

While they were talking, they gradually met more wulin fellows on the way, all of whom were rushing to Juxian Manor to attend the hero banquet. This time, the invitation to the hero banquet had been issued shortly before the opening and the invitation cards did not have the names of the guests, but whoever saw one of them would be welcomed as long as they were a person in wulin. The people who had received the invitation cards had used fast horses to forward them to their fellows in the same night, one person forwarding to another, therefore within one day and one night the invitation cards had been spread very far. Because the time was too limited, most of the people who went to Juxian Manor were from within several hundreds of li of Shaolin Monastery. But Henan was a central region, hence besides local martial arts people, the well-known experts in wulin of the North and the South who had received the message all went to the meeting. The number of people was really not small.

This time, the invitation to the hero banquet was jointly issued by the You Clan's two Heroes of Juxian Manor and 'Yama's Foe' Divine Doctor Xue. The You Clan's two Heroes You Ji and You Ju were rich and powerful and had a wide circle of acquaintances, remarkable martial arts and resounding names, but they were not a formidable force in wulin; they could not be regarded as being people of noble character and high prestige to invite so many heroes and extraordinary people. But Divine Doctor Xue was the person that everybody wanted to make friends with. Even though in general, martial arts practitioners were vainglorious, very few people were confident that they could fight without equal under heaven; even if they really flattered themselves that they were the number one in martial arts nowadays, it was still difficult not to get sick or suffer injuries. If they

could make friends with this Divine Doctor Xue, they themselves would have an extra life because as long as they did not get killed on the spot and Divine Doctor Xue was willing to treat them, they would narrowly escape death. Therefore, if the You Clan's two Heroes invited guests, the people who received the invitation cards would only feel that they themselves were honored, but these were also the invitation cards by Divine Doctor Xue, hence they were like a life-saving talisman. They all thought, if today they got in touch and made friends with him, in the future, if they met unforeseen disasters or accidents he would not be able to ignore them; moreover, as people whose lives were put on the tip of the saber, who could be sure that they would not meet unforeseen disasters? The signatures on the invitation cards were three names 'Xue Muhua, You Ji, You Ju', followed by a line of small words: 'You Ji and You Ju's additional explanation: Mr Xue Muhua is addressed as 'Divine Doctor Xue'.' If there had not been this line of small words, probably the receivers of the invitation cards would not have known what kind of highly able person Xue Muhua was, and hence the number of people going to Juxian Manor would perhaps have been even less than three tenths of what it was at the moment.

When the three people Bao Qianling, Qi Liu and Xiang Wanghai arrived at the manor, the second brother You Ju personally came out to welcome. After entering the hall, they saw that there were already full of people sitting in the hall. Bao Qianling was not acquainted with all of them but as soon as he entered the hall, there were human voices all around, mostly saying: 'Shopkeeper Bao, are you enjoying prosperity?' 'Old chap Bao, how has your business been doing?' Bao Qianling continuously folded his hands in salute and greeted all the heroes. He really did not dare to be careless as even though many of these heroes in jianghu were generous and open-minded, there were also not just a few narrow-minded people. If he forgot to give someone a

nod or a smile in return, he would possibly unconsciously displease them, thus causing endless future troubles; even if it led to a fatal disaster, this also would not be something strange.

You Ju led him to the top position in the east. Divine Doctor Xue stood up and said: 'Brother Bao, Brother Qi, Brother Xiang, the esteemed presence of the three of you here really makes me feel as if my face is covered in gold. I extremely appreciate it.' Bao Qianling promptly returned the salute and said: 'Once Master Xue has beckoned, even if Bao Qianling was so sick that I couldn't move, I would still ask other people to carry me here.' The big brother You Ji laughed and said: 'If you were really bedridden, you'd wanna ask other people to take you here to meet Master Xue even more!' The people around all laughed heartily. You Ju said: 'The three of you have had a tiring journey, please go to the rear hall to have a snack.'

Bao Qianling said: 'It won't be late to have a snack later. May I ask a question? Is Qiao Feng among the guests that Master Xue and the two Masters You invite this time?'

When Divine Doctor Xue and the You Clan's two Heroes heard the two words 'Qiao Feng', their faces slightly changed colors. You Ji said: 'This time we've sent out invitation cards without guest names. Whoever sees them is invited. Brother Bao has mentioned Qiao Feng, what's your intention? Brother Bao and that Qiao Feng guy have quite a friendship, right?'

Bao Qianling said: 'That Qiao Feng guy said he was going to Juxian Manor to attend the great banquet for heroes.'

As soon as he said so, the crowd was startled. At first everyone in the big hall had been talking noisily and in a high-flown way, but all of a sudden, everyone became quiet. The people who were standing far from Bao Qianling could not hear what he had just said, but suddenly finding that no one was talking anymore they themselves also stopped saying what they had not yet finished. The big hall fell silent

instantly, but the distant sounds of people drinking wine in the rear hall and of people talking and laughing in the corridor could be heard.

Divine Doctor Xue asked: 'Brother Bao, how do you know that Qiao Feng guy is gonna come here?'

Bao Qianling said: 'I, Brother Qi and Brother Xiang personally heard that. It's a shame to say, but last night the three of us took a serious tumble.' Xiang Wanghai continuously gave him signals with his eyes, wanting to tell him not to relate the shameful incident of the night before. But Bao Qianling knew Divine Doctor Xue and the You Clan's two Heroes were undoubtedly highly capable, there were also many intelligent people in the hero meeting, if he himself hid a bit, it would definitely cause other people to be suspicious. This matter was very important; he himself had become entangled in the maelstrom, if he dealt with it just a bit improperly, his status and reputation would instantly go out the window. He slowly took the flexible whip out from his waist. The piece of paper which had the four words 'Qiao Feng paying respects' was still sticking to it. He passed the flexible whip to Divine Doctor Xue using both hands and said: 'Qiao Feng ordered the three of us to pass on a message that today he was going to Juxian Manor.' After that, he recounted things such as how they had met Qiao Feng and what he had said, not holding back even a single word. Xiang Wanghai continuously stamped, his whole face reddened with shame.

After Bao Qianling calmly recounted everything, he said: 'This Qiao Feng guy is from the Khitan dog ethnicity, we should still eliminate him even if he was noble and righteous, let alone the fact that his evil has become obvious and he's an increasingly intense danger. If he runs off to distant parts, it'll be hard to hunt him down. But Heaven really has its will, who could have expected that he would willingly hurl himself into the net?'

You Ju muttered: 'I've usually heard that Qiao Feng is both brave and resourceful. His abilities are sufficient for him to successfully do evil. He's not a reckless lout. Could it be that he really dares to go to this great banquet for heroes?'

Bao Qianling said: 'I'm afraid he has other wicked plans. We mustn't be without caution. The more people the more ideas. Let's plan together, everyone.'

While he was saying, many more heroes and extraordinary people arrived at the outside, including 'Impartial Judge' Shan Zheng and his five sons, Grandpa Tan, Granny Tan and Zhao Qiansun. Before long, the two high-level monks of Shaolin School Xuan Nan and Xuan Ji also arrived. Divine Doctor Xue and the You Clan's brothers welcomed and sincerely received them one by one. When mentioning the evil of Qiao Feng, they all raged.

Suddenly, the housekeeper who received guests came in and reported: 'Elder Xu of the Beggar Society has led the Elder of Merit Propagation, the Elder of Rule Enforcement and the four Elders Song, Xi, Chen and Wu to our Manor for a visit.'

Everyone shivered with fear. The Beggar Society was the number one large society in Jianghu and could not be held in contempt. Xiang Wanghai said: 'As expected, the Beggar Society has come here in great force to express support for Qiao Feng.' Shan Zheng said: 'Qiao Feng has already been expelled from the society. He's no longer the Beggar Society's Chief. I saw with my own eyes that they turned their backs on him and became the enemies of one another.' Xiang Wanghai said: 'But at this point they haven't necessarily forgotten all the old feelings.' You Ji said: 'All of the Beggar Society's elders are proud brave men. How could they disregard rights and wrongs to protect their enemy? If they still help Qiao Feng, wouldn't they become Han traitors to the country?' Everyone nodded in approval and said: 'Definitely not even a good-for-nothing would wanna be a Han traitor to the country.'

Divine Doctor Xue and the You Clan's two Heroes went out of the manor to welcome them. Seeing that there were only twelve of thirteen people of the Beggar Society coming, they felt relaxed and thought: 'Needless to say, these beggars are unlikely to protect Qiao Feng. Even if they were up to no good this time, with these twelve of thirteen people, what would they be able to achieve?' They greeted the people such as Elder Xu perfunctorily then invited them to enter the big hall. They could see a worried expression on the faces of all of the Beggar Society's people. Obviously these people were bearing a very heavy load on their minds.

After splitting into hosts and guests, everyone sat down. Elder Xu started the conversation: 'Brother Xue and the two laodi (younger male friend) of the You Family, today you invited all the heroes to gather here, is it because of the newly emerging cause of trouble in wulin Qiao Feng?'

After the heroes heard him call Qiao Feng 'the newly emerging cause of trouble in wulin', they looked at each other, and without prior consultation they all let out a sigh of relief. You Ji said: 'It's exactly for this reason. Elder Xu and every elder of your noble society come here together. This is really a great luck to wulin. If we want to kill this foreign dog, we must get the nod from the elders of your noble society. Otherwise, it would provoke misunderstanding and damage the harmony, making everyone unavoidably regret.'

Elder Xu let out a deep sigh and said: 'This man is extremely ruthless and vicious, and acts strangely. Originally, he achieved quite a few great feats for our society. Recently, when we made mistakes and were plotted against by crooks, it was also him who saved us. But when a dazhangfu (an ambitious or successful man) conducts himself he should attach most importance to the general situation, so we have no choice but to banish those few small kindnesses from our minds. He's a mortal enemy of our Great Song. The Elders of our Society have been treated well by him, but we can't abandon public righteousness because

of personal gratitude. They say righteousness must be placed above family loyalty, let alone the fact that now he isn't a relative of our Society's people's.'

As soon as he said that, everyone in the crowd applauded and cheered.

You Ji then mentioned that Qiao Feng also wanted to attend the great banquet for heroes. When the elders heard that, all of them were astonished. Having followed Qiao Feng for a long time, they knew that he always acted with both valor and strategy, if he really single-handedly came to Juxian Manor, it would be extremely unusual.

Xiang Wanghai suddenly said: 'I think that Qiao Feng guy has deliberately created a diversionary front to make everyone kick their heels in here, but he has slipped away to somewhere no one knows. This is called the tactic of escaping by using crafty schemes.' Elder Wu stretched out his hand, gave the table a heavy slap and scolded: 'Escaping your mother by using crafty schemes! What kind of man is Qiao Feng? Once he says something, how could he not keep his words?' Scolded by him, Xiang Wanghai's face reddened. He said angrily: 'You wanna appear in public to support Qiao Feng, right? I, Xiang, am the first to disapprove of it. Come here; come here; come here. Let's have a fight.'

After hearing all kinds of news that Qiao Feng had killed his parents and master then caused a big disturbance at Shaolin Monastery, Elder Wu had been very depressed, his heart had been filled with resentment and rage and he did not know who he should vent his feelings on. Hence this Xiang Wanghai guy unreasonably challenging Elder Wu was really most welcomed by him. In a flash, he jumped into the courtyard in front of the big hall and said loudly: 'Qiao Feng is from the Khitan dog ethnicity or is completely a Han man? At this moment it's still unclear. If he's really a Khitan barbarian I'll be the first to fight him to the death. Wanna kill Qiao Feng? Even if counting to the person numbered a thousand, it still wouldn't be your turn, you stinking turtle

egg (~ s.o.b). Who the heck are you to gab in here? Escaping your grandmother by using stinking crafty schemes! Come here, your father's gonna teach you a lesson.'

Xiang Wanghai's face had already turned livid. A 'shua' sound was heard, he had drawn the saber out of its sheath. As soon as he looked at the blade, he remembered the piece of paper which read 'Qiao Feng paying respects' and could not help feeling at a loss.

You Ji said: 'The two of you are my honorable guests. Please have some consideration for my face. We cannot lose harmony.' Elder Xu also said: 'Brother Wu, you shouldn't be rash in your actions. You must take into account the reputation of the whole Society's.'

Suddenly someone in the crowd said in a soft voice: 'Having produced such a person as Qiao Feng, the Beggar Society really has a very good reputation. You must take it into account and preserve it carefully!'

As soon as the Beggar Society's extraordinary men heard that, they shouted furiously: 'Who's saying that?' 'Come out if you have skills. What kind of brave man would hide in the crowd to be a dwarf?' 'Which goddamn turtle egg is that?'

But after saying those sentences that person kept silent, hence no one knew who had just said those words. Being ridiculed with those two sentences, the extraordinary people from the Beggar Society were totally annoyed but because they could not find anyone who admitted saying so, they could not do anything either. Even though the Beggar Society was the number one large society in jianghu, the extraordinary men of the Society were all beggars. After all, they were not upper-class people who paid particular attention to formalities, hence some of them shouted and some even cursed other people's eighteen generations of ancestors.

Divine Doctor Xue frowned and said: 'All of you please calm down and hear this senile old man say a few words.'

The beggars gradually became quiet.

Suddenly, in the crowd, that cold voice said again: 'Very good, very good, Qiao Feng has sent this many formidable guys to here to carry out undercover tasks. After a while, there'll definitely be a good play to watch.'

As soon as the people such as Elder Wu heard that, they got even angrier. Shua-shua sounds were heard continuously; dazzling lights of sabers were seen; many people had taken out their weapons. The rest of the guests only thought that the Beggar Society's people wanted to fight therefore many of them also took out their weapons. With a lot of shouting and cursing, the hall was plunged into disorder. Divine Doctor Xue and the You Clan's brothers advised everyone to calm down, but the shouts by the three of them only added to the uproar in the hall.

Translated by Moinllieon

In this chaos, a servant hurriedly ran into the hall. He ran up to You Ji's side and whispered something to him. You Yi's face darkened as he asked the servant something. The servant, his face full of fear and surprise, pointed to the outside. You Ji turned and whispered something to Divine Doctor Xue, causing his face to drop as well. You Ju walked up to his older brother's side and You Ji told him as well. You Ju's face dropped immediately.

One man told two, two men told four, and just like that the word spread among the crowd. In an instant, the noisy and chaotic hall was in complete silence.

Because everyone had heard the words by now: "Qiao Feng is here!"

Divine Doctor Xue nodded towards the You brothers and shot a look towards Xuan Nan and Xuan Ji, the two ShaoLin representatives before declaring: "Let him in!"

The servant turned and walked out.

Everyone's heart was beating a mile a minute, despite of the fact that all of them knew that with their numeric advantage, they could overwhelm Qiao Feng and chop him

into a million pieces in an instant. But this man was just too famous, and coming here all by himself like this, obviously he wasn't afraid, don't know what kind of devious plot he is pulling.

In the silence, the only sounds one can hear is the steady beat of horse hooves and the low rumble of wheels on stone-slabs as a donkey carriage approached the front door. But it didn't stop there and just walked in through the door. The You brothers were both frowning heavily, feeling that they have been slighted by this show of manners, or lack thereof. "Ge-Dong". "Ge-Dong". The wheels of the carriage hopped over the door sill. A huge man, with a whip in his hand, was sitting on the driver's seat. The curtains of the carriage were down, hiding something in the carriage. But everyone was staring at the driver.

Square-faced and tall with a wide chest and huge shoulders, his eyes weren't angry but demanded attention and instilled fear. Who else could it be but former leader of the Beggar Clan Qiao Feng?

Qiao Feng put the whip down beside him and hopped off the carriage. Cupping his fist, he said: "I heard that Divine Doctor Xue and the You Brothers were hosting a Gathering of Heroes here at JuXian Mansion. I can't consider myself a 'hero' and don't dare attend such a gathering. It's just that there's an emergency I have to ask of Divine Doctor Xue. I hope you will forgive me for such an intrusion."

He bowed deeply, looking very sincere.

The more polite Qiao Feng acted, the more convinced the rest of them were that he's got something up his sleeves. You Ju gave his left hand a slight flick and four of his disciples immediately snuck out from the sides to inspect the surrounding areas.

"What does Brother Qiao want of me?" Divine Doctor Xue cupped his fist back and asked.

Qiao Feng took two steps back, moved the carriage curtains aside and helped Ah-Zhu out.

“Because of my rash actions, this girl was hit by another's palm and was severely injured. In this world, nobody but Divine Doctor Xue could help her. That's why I was so rude to come here, to ask Divine Doctor Xue to save her life.”

When everyone saw the carriage, they all got suspicious about what was inside. Some guessed that it was probably some poison or bomb, others thought it was some poisonous snakes or ferocious beasts, and still others guessed it was Divine Doctor Xue's parents or relatives that Qiao Feng was going to use to blackmail him. Nobody could have guessed that it would be a sixteen or seventeen year old girl that would be stepping out of the carriage asking Divine Doctor Xue for help. Everyone was surprised.

The girl was wearing a light yellow colored shirt and had a very pronounced forehead, making her look very unattractive. Turned out that Ah-Zhu decided that the MuRong family of GuSu had too many enemies out in the martial world and there was a chance if Divine Doctor Xue found out who she was that he would refuse to help her. So she went out and bought a new set of clothes and put on a disguise in the carriage. However, since she was going to see the doctor, she couldn't disguise herself as a man or an old woman.

This turn of events caught Divine Doctor Xue off guard as well. In his life, he had seen plenty of people coming to him from faraway to seek his medical help, it happens almost every day. But presently, with everyone trying to figure out how to catch and kill Qiao Feng, this despicable and incorrigible villain would just walk up in here and trap himself. It was quite a hard pill to swallow.

Looking at Ah-Zhu over, he decided that Qiao Feng could not possibly be doing this out of lust because of her unattractiveness and young age. Suddenly, an idea hit him: “Maybe this little gal is his younger sister? Um, not possible. This man killed his parents and his master as well, there's no way he would take such a risk over his younger sister. Maybe

it's his daughter? I don't remember hearing that Qiao Feng got married."

Being the great doctor he was, he could always tell the health of people with one glance as well as their bodily characteristics. Seeing Qiao Feng and Ah-Zhu standing side by side, with one big and strong, the other small and weak, the two of them had nothing in common. Therefore he decided that they were not related at all.

"What is this young miss's surname?" He said after humming a little while his thought worked itself out. "And what relation is she with you, sir?"

Qiao Feng was taken a back a bit. He had called Ah-Zhu nothing but "Ah-Zhu" ever since they met, but was her surname really "Zhu"? He didn't know. So he turned to Ah-Zhu and asked.

"Is your surname Zhu?"

"My surname is Wan," Ah-Zhu replied with a smile.

Qiao Feng nodded. "Divine Doctor Xue, her surname is actually Wan. I just found that out myself."

"So... this young miss and you aren't well acquainted?" Divine Doctor Xue found that this was getting stranger and stranger.

"She's a maid of a friend of mine."

"Who is that friend of yours, sir? Must be very important to you, sir, or else how could you care so much for your friend's maid?"

"That friend is only my friend in spirit," Qiao Feng shook his head, "I have never met him before."

An audible gasp escaped from nearly everyone present when they heard this. Most of them didn't believe him, thinking that he must be carrying out some plan and was just using this as an excuse to get in. But still, a good number of them knew that Qiao Feng had always been a very straightforward man, no matter what kind of terrible things he might have done, he probably wouldn't lie in front of everyone because of the pride he had in who he was.

Divine Doctor Xue reached out and felt Ah-Zhu's pulse. Noticing that her pulse was indeed very weak but the life force {for lack of a better word} inside her was very strong, totally opposite of what one would expect. He switched and felt Ah-Zhu pulse through her left wrist. By then he had already figured out everything.

“Had this girl not been fed the incredible Elixir of Master Tan of Mount TaiHeng and not received your constant infusion of inner force, she would have died a long time ago from the Abbot Xuan Ci's Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm.” He said to Qiao Feng. {That's what Da Jin Gang Zhang translates to}

This caused quite a stir from the crowd. Master Tan and Grandma Tan looked at each other, wondering: “How did she get fed our Elixir?”

XuanNan and Xuanji was even more astonished: “When did our Abbot hit a girl with Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm? And if she really did get hit by it, how in the world could she have survived?”

“Doctor Xue,” XuanNan had to speak up, “our Abbot had not left the premise of our humble temple for years now. And women aren't allowed into ShaoLin Temple. So this Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm could not have come from my elder martial brother.”

Divine Doctor Xue frowned: “Is there anyone else in the world who knows this Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm?”

That question quieted both XuanNan and Xuanji. They have been at ShaoLin for several decades now and were taught by the same master as XuanCi, they worked as hard as possible and tried as hard as they might. But this Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm still required some natural born talent and neither was able to master it. But neither one was bitter nor regret trying, for they knew that only once every several centuries in the history of ShaoLin does someone with enough martial arts genius come along

to master this palm skill. There were times when nobody among the hundreds of monks in the temple knew it, but it was never lost because of the great pains that the monks of the past generations took to record down the details of training for such a skill.

“Did she really get hit by Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm?” Xuanji wanted to ask. But he stopped himself before he did. For asking such a question would be questioning the skills of Divine Doctor Xue, which would have been incredibly rude and unseemly. So instead he turned to Qiao Feng.

“Last night you snuck into ShaoLin and killed my martial brother XuanKu. At that time you had been hit once by Abbot's Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm. Had that palm hit this girl, how could she have survived?” He inquired accusingly.

“Reverend XuanKu is my master and I am indebted to him forever.” Qiao Feng shook his head in response. “Until I repay him for everything he has done for me, I would rather die than harm him one bit.”

“Still won't own up to it?” Xuanji angrily replied. “Then what about that ShaoLin disciple that you kidnapped? Did you not do that either?”

“The 'ShaoLin disciple' I took with me is right in front of you at this moment.” Qiao Feng thought to himself. Instead he replied: “If Reverend insist on accusing me of kidnapping a ShaoLin disciple, then could you please tell me what is the name of the ShaoLin disciple that I have kidnapped?”

Xuanji and XuanNan looked at each other, again, in stunned silence as neither one of them could say a thing. Last night, along with XuanCi, they had quite clearly saw Qiao Feng take a ShaoLin disciple with him as he was escaping. Yet when they checked afterwards, nobody was missing. This was one riddle that they could not figure out for the life of them.

“Brother Qiao, all by himself, snuck into and out of ShaoLin last night without a single injury and still was able to kidnap a ShaoLin disciple with him. That's rather hard to believe.” Divine Doctor Xue cut in. “There must be something going on here that you are not telling us about.”

“I didn't kill Reverend XuanKu, and I certainly did not kidnap a ShaoLin disciple last night either. There's a lot of things that you guys don't understand, and there's a lot of things that I don't understand either.” Qiao Feng replied.

“No matter what,” XuanNan declared, “this young miss could not have been injured by my martial brother, the Abbot. The Abbot is a respected and enlightened leader of a sect. How could he possibly bring himself to hit a young miss such as her? No matter what this young miss is guilty of, my martial brother would not stoop to her level and hit her.” { This is sort of a put down, but not really. Etiquette and protocol calls for the leader of a sect to ignore the misgivings of youths and people in a lower position }

Qiao Feng figured: “It's probably better that they insist that Ah-Zhu wasn't injured by Abbot XuanCi. Otherwise Divine Doctor Xue might, because of ShaoLin, refuse to heal her.” So he decided to just push the boat down the river and go along with it.

“Of course, Abbot XuanCi is forever benevolent and would never hurt a girl like her so. Most likely it's somebody disguising as a ShaoLin master causing trouble, hurting people, and spreading rumors.” Qiao Feng said.

Xuanji and XuanNan looked at each other, again, and slowly nodded: “This bastard Qiao Feng may be villainous, but these couple of words are very reasonable.”

Ah-Zhu was giggling inside: “What Master Qiao said is completely true, there really was somebody disguised as a ShaoLin monk, causing trouble and spreading rumors. Only the person who the pretender was trying to be wasn't Abbot XuanCi but Monk ZhiQing.”

But how could XuanJi, XuanNan, Divine Doctor Xue, and the rest of them figure out the real meaning behind Qiao Feng's words?

Seeing XuanJi and XuanNan's reaction, Divine Doctor Xue decided that it was ok to move on.

"So, it seems that there's actually another person in the world that knows Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm," He continued his diagnoses. "When this person made his move, something was in the way and much of the power of his strike was dissipated. That's how Miss Wan was able to survive the strike. That person's strike power is probably on par with that of Abbot XuanCi's"

Qiao Feng had to admire the doctor: "Much of Abbot XuanCi's strike's power was indeed blocked with my bronze shield. Divine Doctor Xue is truly amazing to be able to describe all of this just by simply measuring Ah-Zhu's pulse. Looks like there's hope that he would heal Ah-Zhu."

Smiling, he said: "If this young girl would die from Buddha's Great Attendant Palm, then it would cause ShaoLin to lose some face. So I beg Divine Doctor Xue to cure her." He bowed as he finished.

"Who hit you? Where were you when you got hurt? Where is that person now?" XuanJi asked Ah-Zhu before Divine Doctor Xue could reply. He was worried over the reputation of ShaoLin and decided that he must get to the bottom of this.

Ah-Zhu, unlike the serious and measured Qiao Feng, was a fun loving girl who tells harmless lies and makes stuff up all the time. So at this point, she figured: "These monks are all afraid of master, so why don't I just bring him into this and scare them a little?"

"That person is a young gentleman, very handsome and suave looking, around twenty eight or twenty nine years old. This Master Qiao and I was just talking about how amazing Divine Doctor Xue is. He's not just the best in the world, he's just about the best there ever was and ever will be. There's

nobody like him before and almost surely nobody as good will come in the future. Even the gods and goddesses in the heavens aren't as great."

There isn't a single person in this world who doesn't like hearing his own praise. Divine Doctor Xue had heard so many praise like this in his life time that he had lost count a long time ago. But this is the first time that he had ever heard praise from an articulate young girl. Plus the fact that she was exaggerating shamelessly. He could not help but stroke his beard and smile at the praise.

Qiao Feng, however, was frowning: "What is she talking about? This gal is making stuff up like crazy."

"That's when I said: 'With Divine Doctor Xue in the world, we don't have to bother learning kungfu anymore.'" Ah-Zhu continued. "Master Qiao asked: 'Why not?' I said: 'Divine Doctor Xue could even resurrect a dead person, then what's the point of learning kungfu? You kill one, he cures one; you kill two, he heals a pair. Aren't we just wasting our efforts for nothing?'"

She was articulate and her voice was easy on the ear. And even though she's injured, and was imitating the QingCheng Sect disciples in their SiChuan dialect, this spiel sounded like marbles rolling around in a jade bowl and was a pleasure to listen to.

Everyone smiled at her talk, some even laughed out loud.

But Ah-Zhu didn't smile at all as she continued: "There was this young gentleman sitting by us listening to us talking. He suddenly snickered and said: 'The strike powers of people in this world are mostly weak and completely devoid of inner force. That doctor named Xue is not worthy of such a lofty of status. Let's see if he can heal this palm strike of mine.' As he said that, he struck out towards me through air. I thought he was joking with me because he was so far away. But Master Qiao was shock...."

"And he stuck his arm out to block it?" Xuanji interrupted.

"No!" Ah-Zhu shook her head and continued. "Had Master Qiao stuck his arm out to block, then I wouldn't have been hurt. But Master Qiao was too far away from me to do that, so instead he picked up a chair and threw it over. His timing was just right and with a huge crack, the chair was smashed into pieces by the force of that young gentleman's palm strength. That young gentleman spoke in such a soft SuZhou dialect, but there was nothing soft about his kungfu. I immediately felt as if I was weightless, as if I had flown into the clouds, without a single ounce of strength left in my body. Then I heard that he said: 'Go and tell that Divine Doctor Xue of yours to go flip a couple more medical books and get a little practice. That way when he has to do the same thing for Abbot XuanCi in the future he would know what to do.'"

"What did he mean by that?" XuanNan frowned.

"He seemed to say that he would use this Buddha's Great Warrior Attendant Palm on Abbot XuanCi in the future." Ah-Zhu replied.

"Ooooh!" Almost everyone in the crowd uttered in unison. Several more people simultaneously added: "Using your own method, back onto yourself!"

"So it is GuSu MuRong!" A couple of other people chimed in, making sure to add the "so it is" part in so as to tell everyone else that they suspected as much a long time ago.

Nobody knew that Ah-Zhu was doing it because of ShaoLin's wrongful accusation of her Master MuRong. Figuring that sooner or later he and ShaoLin's misunderstanding was going to come to a head, she figured that she might as well make something up to boast her Master MuRong a bit and scare ShaoLin at the same time.

Suddenly, You Ju cut in: "Brother Qiao just said a while ago that it was somebody disguised as a ShaoLin master in order to cause trouble who injured this young miss. But this young miss said it was a young gentleman who injured her instead. Who's telling the truth here?"

"There's also some people disguised as ShaoLin monks as well." Ah-Zhu immediately replied. "I saw two monks who claimed they were from ShaoLin, but they stole black dog from a family, killed it, and ate it."

She knew she had made a mistake in her lies, so she immediately went off on a tangent and changed the subject.

Knowing that she wasn't really telling the truth, Divine Doctor Xue couldn't make up her mind whether or not to try and treat her. He looked over at Xuanji and XuanNan before turning towards You Ji and You Ju, and then finally turned his eyes towards Qiao Feng and Ah-Zhu.

"Divine Doctor Xue," Qiao Feng spoke up, "if you save this girl today. I, Qiao Feng, would be forever indebted to you."

"Forever indebted to me?" Divine Doctor Xue sneered. "Do you actually plan on walking out of JuXian Mansion alive today?"

"Dead or alive, it doesn't really matter. But this young girl's injuries had to be treated by you, Doctor."

"Why should I save her?" Divine Doctor Xue casually asked.

"Save one life, seven steps closer to Paradise. Divine Doctor Xue is a respected member of the martial world and surely could not bear to let an innocent girl like her die needlessly."

"If anyone else asked me, I would treat this girl. Hmph. But if you asked me, then I wouldn't."

Qiao Feng's face immediately stiffened as he sincerely declared: "The heroes are gathered today at JuXian Mansion to discuss how to get me, I know that."

"Ai-yo!" Ah-Zhu cut in. "Master Qiao, if that's the case, then you shouldn't have taken such a risk for me."

"I thought that since everyone here is a real man and know the difference between right and wrong." Qiao Feng continued. "The person you want to kill is me and me alone. This young girl has nothing to do with this. Divine Doctor

Xue would actually move his hatred of me onto this young Miss Wan. How could that be right?"

Divine Doctor Xue had no comeback for what he said. Only after a long pause did he finally say: "Whether or not to treat a person is my decision and mine alone, others can't force me to do it. Qiao Feng, with your terrible crimes, we were just talking about how to catch you, chop you into a million pieces so as to avenge your parents and master. But instead you came walking in instead. That's better than anything we could hope for. Why don't you just end it yourself right here?"

He flicked his right hand a little. Everyone in the crowd gave a shout and unsheathed their weapons. The hall shimmered in the almost blinding reflected light of the weapons. There were countless amounts of sabres and daggers, axes and whips. This was followed by another loud cheer from up above as the ceiling was suddenly filled with people as well, guarding every piece of the room.

Qiao Feng had been in plenty of huge battles and fights in his life. But he was usually leading the Beggar Clan into battle and hence usually had the numerical superiority over his foes. Never had he ever been trapped in such a predicament all by himself, not to mention there's a severely injured girl at his side. How exactly does he get out of this? He had no idea and his heart began to pound.

Ah-Zhu was even more frightened as she began to cry. "Master Qiao, just get out of here. Don't worry about me. They have no issues with me and wouldn't hurt me."

"That's right, these people are all good people. They would never harm her for no reason. It's probably best for me to get out of here as soon as possible." Qiao Feng thought. "A real man should treat other's life like his own. Divine Doctor Xue hasn't promised to treat her yet. Her life is not saved yet, how could I be so afraid to die and leave her like this?"

Looking around, he could see that there was several famous martial arts masters present, quite a number of them

he knew personally, all of them possessing great skills. But with this, the blood in his veins began to warm up: "So what if I died here? Real men should live joylessly and die fearlessly."

He let out a hearty laugh: "You all say that I am Khitan and want to get rid of this stone from your shoes. Hehe, am I Han or am I Khitan? Even I don't know."

"That's right, you are a mutt, a bastard! Only that even you yourself don't know what kind of bastard you are!" A thin and squeaky voice suddenly said from amidst the crowd. This was the same person who had made fun of the Beggar Clan earlier. But since he just says a couple of words at a time, nobody knew who it was. Everyone looked to where the voice came from, but saw no lips moving. If you say that it came from a short person, there was no short person present either.

Hearing those words, Qiao Feng quietly observed for a long time before nodding a bit and moving on. Turning around to Divine Doctor Xue: "If I was Han, how could I forgive you for your insult today? If I really am a Khitan, the sworn enemy of everything that is of the Great Song, the first person I would kill would be you, so to avoid me killing one hero of the Great Song and you saving one patriot of Great Song. Right?"

"That's right." Divine Doctor Xue replied. "No matter what happens, you are going to kill me."

"I ask you to save this girl today and exchange one life for another. If you save her, I would never even touch your hair."

"In all my life, I have only listened to other beg, not threats." Divine Doctor Xue coldly sneered.

"A life for another. It is as fair of an exchange as you can get, it's not a threat."

"Aren't you the least bit ashamed?" That squeaky voice suddenly said. "You are going to become meat sauce under

everyone's lives and you are still talking about showing mercy and letting others live? You...."

"Get the hell out of here!" Qiao Feng suddenly screamed at the top of his lungs, causing the roof tiles to shake and the dust to come falling off of the ceiling bars. Everyone's ears were buzzing from the scream and their hearts pounding.

A man stumbled out from the crowd as if he was drunk. He was wearing a green robe and his face was deathly gray. Nobody recognized him.

"Ah!" Master Tan suddenly shouted. "That's Tan Qing, the Soul Chasing Cane! That's right, he's "Overflowing Evil" Duan YanQing's disciple."

The Beggar Clan members, upon hearing that he's Duan YanQing's disciple, began cursing at him furiously. Turned out that soon after the West Xia martial arts master were captured using their own "Gentle Breeze of Sadness," Duan YanQing arrived. Nobody within the Beggar Clan was able to stand up to him as he cured those West Xia kungfu masters using an extremely bad smelling antidote and turned them towards the Beggar Clan, causing the Beggar Clan to take on huge losses. Everyone in the clan hates and fear Duan YanQing, knowing that without Qiao Feng, there's nobody in the clan that could stand up to this "World's Evilest Man" in the future.

Tan Qing's face was contorted almost beyond recognition, as if he was in great pain. His hands kept on grasping his chest as a voice came emanating from within his body: "I... I don't owe you anything and you do not know me, why... why did you have to do that?"

His voice was squeaky and sharp, but was staggered as if he couldn't catch his breath. But his lips did not move at all, to the amazement of most everyone present. A few of the people present knew that he was using a skill to talk out of his stomach which, when used in conjunction with a high level of inner strength, could be used as a depressant which

would confuse and even kill whoever that hears him. But when up against a person with stronger inner force, this skill would not only not work, but would backfire and hurt the practitioner.

“You are Duan YanQing's disciple?” Divine Doctor Xue angrily shouted at him. “This is a gathering of heroes, only the heroes of the world are allowed. How did such a low-life scum like you get in?”

“Gathering of heroes my ***!” A voice suddenly said. “Looks more like a gathering of zeroes to me!”

When he said the first word, he was still far away, on top of the tall walls outside. But by the time he said the word “me,” he had arrived with his voice. Jumping off of the tall wall, one could see that he is unusually tall and incredibly fast. The people stationed on the roof tried to stop him by throwing their swords or hitting him through the air with their palm strikes, but all for naught as they were too slow and he was able to dodge out of the way. Quite a number of people in the hall recognized that he was “Evil Extreme” Yun ZhongHe. With a flick of his body, Yun ZhongHe had arrived inside of the hall. Grabbing a hold to Tan Qing, he shot directly towards Divine Doctor Xue. Fearing that he would kill Divine Doctor Xue, everyone in the hall immediately rushed up to protect him. But Yun ZhongHe had expected this and played a trick with them, feigning attack so as to retreat. Seeing everyone rush up to protect Divine Doctor Xue, he immediately jumped back and hopped onto the wall again.

There's plenty of martial arts masters in the room, and those whose kungfu are better than Yun ZhongHe number in the forty's if not the fifty's. But because he had grabbed the initiative and caught everyone off guard, plus his superior lightness kungfu, nobody was able to catch up to him once he had hopped onto the wall. Several people reached into their shirts for projectiles and those people on the roof tried to stop him again, but all looked too late.

“Stay here!” Qiao Feng shouted and struck out a palm strike through air. The force of the strike was like a formless blade, flying through air and hit Yun ZhongHe squarely in his back.

Yun ZhongHe let out a suppressed moan as he fell flatly onto the ground, blood spilling out of his mouth like a fountain. Tan Qing was still standing though, just that he would stumble left a bit and then jump to the right, all the while humming a little tune. Quite a comic scene, only that nobody was laughing. Everyone was shocked by the horror that was playing out in front of their eyes.

Divine Doctor Xue knew that even though Yun ZhongHe was hurt badly, he could still be saved. But Tan Qing had already lost his soul and no amount of medicine or miracle cures in this world could save him anymore. Reflecting how Qiao Feng, with a casual scream and a palm strike, would inflict such incredible damage, he realized that if Qiao Feng wanted to take his life, there probably isn't anyone that could stop him. While he was reflecting, Tan Qing had stopped stumbling around and just stood there. The humming had ceased as well and his eyes were wide open, but he wasn't breathing anymore.

Back when Tan Qing had insulted the Beggar Clan, the clan members were furious but had nobody to take it out on, so they were forced to swallow all that anger. But now, seeing how Qiao Feng took care of him, all of them cheered on the inside. The more straightforward ones like Elder Song and Elder Wu almost let out a shout of praise but held back, realizing that Qiao Feng was from Khitan.

But deep inside every one of their hearts they thought: “If he was our leader, the Beggar Clan would never lose. Otherwise... Ay! The going is gonna get really tough from here on out, the Beggar Clan would never return to its former glories.”

Yun ZhongHe struggled up and stumbled out of the door. He took a couple of steps before throwing up another

mouthful of blood. Seeing how badly he's injured, nobody felt like troubling him anymore as everyone thought: "He called this the 'Gathering of Zeroes', yet none of us could do anything about him. Ironically it was Qiao Feng who struck and made him pay for such an insult."

"Honorable Brothers You, I have met up with many friends here today who, after today, will be friends no longer." Qiao Feng turned towards the You Brothers. "I could not but feel sad, so I would like to ask you for some wine."

Everyone was caught off guard by his request. "Let's see what the hell he's going to do here." You Ju thought to himself as he instructed the servants to go fetch some wine. Because this was a planned gathering at JuXian Mansion, there was plenty of wine in stock and soon the servants came in with flasks of wine and cups to drink as well.

"These cups are just too small. Could you get something big to drink out of?" Qiao Feng replied.

Two servants went off and returned with several huge bowls and a newly opened jug of white wine. They placed them on the table in front of Qiao Feng and filled one bowl up with wine.

"Fill them all up!" Qiao Feng commanded and the two servants obeyed.

Lifting up one bowl in his hand, Qiao Feng turned towards the crowd: "Of the many heroes gathered here today, there are many who are old friends of mine. But since you are suspicious of me, I propose we drink our friendship away. If any friend wishes to take Qiao Feng's life, then come up and have a drink with me. Afterwards, our old friendship will be history. If you kill me it's not betrayal, if I kill you it's not cross. Let the heroes of the world be our witness."

A coldness shot through everyone as the hall was completely silent. "If I go up and drink with him, he would undoubtedly try a sneak attack on me," each of them thought. "That close, how can I block that powerful strike of his?"

In this stunned silence, a woman dressed in funeral clothing suddenly walked out. It was Ma DaYuan's widow Madame Ma. "My husband died in your hands, this friendship that you spoke off ended a long time ago." she said in a grave voice as she lifted the bowl up to her lips and took a sip.

"I cannot drink the entire bowl. But the vengeance of my husband will be like this wine." She said as she slowly poured the wine that was left in the bowl onto the ground.

Qiao Feng looked her straight in the face and couldn't help but notice how beautiful and elegant she looked. It was dark that night in the apricot woods and the firelight was flickering, so he didn't get a chance to get a good look at her. Never could he had guessed that such a formidable woman would look so fragile and delicate. Without a word he picked up another bowl, drank its entire content in one breath, and signaled the servant at his side to fill the bowls again.

After Madame Ma walked back into the crowd. Elder Xu walked up and, without saying a word, drank an entire bowl of wine with Qiao Feng doing the same. Then came the Scribe Elder, after whom Enforcer Elder Bai Shijing walked up. Just as he lifted up his bowl and was about to drink, Qiao Feng stopped him.

"Hold on!"

Brother Qiao, do you have something you want to say?" Bai Shijing had always admired Qiao Feng and treated him with the utmost respect, and even now he was still the same, just that now he doesn't refer to Qiao Feng as "chief" anymore.

"We have been like brothers for so long now. Who could have known that we would end up being enemies?" Qiao Feng sighed.

"Brother Qiao's birth, I had heard rumors about it for a long time." Bai Shijing replied, fighting back tears. "Back then I would not have believed it even if it meant my life.

But now... now it really is true. If it wasn't because our country is at war, Bai Shijing, I, would rather die than be Brother Qiao's enemy."

"I understand." Qiao Feng nodded. "Soon we will be friends no more and be enemies in battle. But I have a favor to ask."

"If it doesn't hurt my country, I would give my all."

Qiao Feng smiled and pointed to Ah-Zhu: "All brothers of the Beggar Clan, if you still feel the slightest beholden to me for what happened in the past, then all I ask of you is to ensure this young miss's safety."

Everyone got the sense that it was almost as if he was asking others to take care of his orphan. For after drinking with his friend one-by-one, he would fight. Being surrounded by so many masters, even if he kills a good number of his foes, it was highly unlikely he was going to survive. Even though everyone in the crowd hates him for being Khitan and for committing such heinous crimes, they couldn't help but admire the courage in his actions.

Bai Shijing had always had a good relationship with Qiao Feng, and upon hearing what is equivalent to his last wishes, he had to reply: "Don't worry Brother Qiao. Bai Shijing, I, would personally beg Divine Doctor Xue to treat her. If anything should happen to Miss Wan, then I would kill myself so as to repent for Brother Qiao."

He brought the bowl to his lips and drank the strong wine down in one breath. Qiao Feng did the same.

Elder Song, Elder Xi, and the rest of the Beggar Clan all came up and drank the wine with him. After everyone in the Beggar Clan finished, the heroes and masters from other sects all walked up and drank.

The longer this spectacle went on, the more amazed everyone became. Qiao Feng had already drank at least forty or fifty bowls of wine by now. The huge jug of strong wine had long since been killed and the servants had to go and fetch another jug. But Qiao Feng still looked sober and

alert, other than the fact his belly was protruded a bit, there was no sign of anything different about him.

“Forget the fight, at this rate, he would drink to death,” everyone thought.

But Qiao Feng was one of those people who grows more alert the more he drinks. These last couple of days all the frustrations from the false accusations had been bottled up inside him, finally he just decided to just let it all out and drink to his satisfaction before ending it all with a fight.

After even Bao QianLing and Fast Sabre Qi Liu had drank with him, Xiang WangHai walked up and picked a bowl up. “Hey you! I'm going to drink a bowl with you,” he said in a rude tone.

Feeling the effects of the wine, Qiao Feng looked at him out of the corner of his eye and replied: “I'm drinking this friendship-ending drink with the heroes of the world to say that our friendships are a thing of the past. What have you done to deserve this drink? What friendship did I have with you?”

Not waiting for an answer, Qiao Feng took a step forward and grabbed his chest with his right hand. With a simple wave of his arm, Qiao Feng threw him out of the hall. Xiang WanHai hit the marble walls outside with a loud “bang” and instantly fainted.

At this, the hall descended into chaos.

Qiao Feng jumped out of the hall and into the yard before turning around to face the crowd. “Who want to come out here and fight to the death first?” He shouted at the top of his lungs.

Seeing him standing there in all his glory, nobody dared to ran forth and challenge him.

“If you guys aren't going to start this off, then I'm going to!” Qiao Feng shouted.

“Bang!” “Bang!” Two men were already hit by his palm through the air and fell to the ground. Going along with his own momentum, he charged back into the hall and, with a

flurry of fists and kicks mixed with palms and elbows, instantly took down several other fighters.

"Everyone, back up against the wall, don't get into a melee!" You Ji shouted.

There were more than three hundred fighters within the hall. If they all charged up at once, there was no way Qiao Feng could fend them off no matter how good he was. It was just that when everyone was stuck together pushing against one another, only five or six men was at Qiao Feng's side and could truly fight him. And even then, with all the weapons waving around, a lot of people were actually trying to protect themselves instead of attacking. But with You Ji's shout, the middle of the hall immediately emptied.

"Let's see how great the You Brothers of JuXian Mansion are!" Qiao Feng shouted as he lifted his left palm and sent a huge wine jug flying towards You Ji's face. You Ji put up both hands and was about to conjure up some inner force to bat the jug away. But unexpectedly Qiao Feng followed up with a right fist, which, with a loud bang, smashed the wine jug in a million pieces in mid-air. The sharp broken pieces and shards of the jug, pushed by the force of Qiao Feng's palm, were like hundreds of metal darts or daggers. Three pieces hit You Ji in the face, which was soon covered in blood. Several people at his sides were hit as well. The shouting and cursing of pain and warnings were deafening.

"Daddy! Daddy!" Suddenly a boy's cry could be heard coming from a corner of the hall. You Ji recognized the voice as that of his only son, You DanZhi's. Despite his predicament, he still found time to look over and see that You DanZhi's left cheek was covered in blood, having been hit by one of the piece of the jug.

"What are you doing here? Get back inside!" You Ji yelled.

"Yes sir!" You DanZhi replied and snuck back behind a column but still stuck out his head to watch the fight.

Qiao Feng kicked with his left foot and another jug flew off. Just as he was about to add another palm strike to smash

it, he suddenly felt a soft and gentle palm force approaching him from behind. Eventhough the force of the strike was gentle and soft, it was very powerful and backed up with a quite strong inner force. Knowing that it had come from a strong foe, Qiao Fend did not dare to wait any longer and immediately returned a palm strike back in response.

The two forces met and both sides were slightly taken aback and needed a moment to collect themselves. When Qiao Feng took a good look at who his foe was, he saw a weird looking ugly man. It was none other than Zhao QianSun. "He has a tremendous inner force, got to be careful of him." Qiao Feng told himself as he drew in another breath and unleashed a second, mountain-splitting palm strike out at him.

Knowing that he could not stand up to this strike with just one palm, Zhao QianSun brought up both of his palm in an effort to block the incoming strike.

"Don't you want to live anymore?" A female voice came from the side as he was suddenly pulled over to the side and just avoided Qiao Feng's strike.

But the force of the Qiao Feng's palm still came rolling in, hitting the three men behind Zhao QianSun head on and sent them flying into the wall, kicking up a huge amount of dust and knocking loose a couple pieces of the wall.

Turning around, Zhao QianSun saw that it was Grandma Tan who had pulled him away. He was overjoyed: "Xiao Juan, you saved me!"

"I'll attack his left and you attack his right." Grandma Tan said.

Just as Zhao QianSun nodded his head and said "ok," a short and skinny old man charged toward Qiao Feng. It was Grandpa Tan.

Even though he had quite a small built, his kungfu was quite formidable. As his left palm struck out, his right palm immediately followed, at which he pulled back his left hand and struck out with it again. Three palm strikes in a row, just

like three consecutive waves, one after another, each building on the other until it was released all at once with a force three times more powerful than his normal palm strike.

"Wonderful! 'Three Rolling Waves of the Yangtze!'" Qiao Feng shouted as he waved out his left palm.

The two forces collided violently, pushing many spectators on the side away. At this time, Zhao QianSun and Grandma Tan's attacks arrived as well. They were soon followed by the Beggar Clan as Elder Xu, Elder Cheng, and many other elders joined the foray.

"Brother Qiao, Khitan is the sworn nemesis of our Great Song. We are only doing this for our country, forgive us!" Scribe Elder shouted.

"We have already drank our friendship away, why so polite? En garde!" Qiao Feng replied with a laugh as he stuck his left foot out at him.

Despite what he said, because of what they went through together, not only could he not bring himself to take away the lives of his Beggar Clan brothers, he did not want to make them look bad in front of others. So as he stuck his foot half way out, he suddenly switched directions.

Fast Sabre Qi Liu let out an unusual yelp and took off. He didn't jump, but was kicked by Qiao Feng in his stomach. He was prepared to slash down with his sabre onto Qiao Feng's head, but because his body took off, this slash went astray. With a loud thud, his sabre came down upon one of the support beams on the ceiling. With the force he put into the chop, the cut was several centimeters deep and his sabre actually got stuck within the cut. This particular sabre was the prized weapon of Fast Sabre Qi Liu, it was the weapon that made him famous. So, facing such a formidable foe, he could not bring himself to let go of the sabre as he grasped the handle of the sabre tightly as he could with his right hand. In doing this, he doomed himself to hang in the air. It was quite an unusual situation, but everyone down in the hall was staring death in the face and nobody dared to even

spare a moment to even take a look at him, much less laugh at his predicament.

Ever since he joined the martial world, Qiao Feng had never lost a single one of his hundreds of battles. Not only that, even though he had fought against many a martial arts masters, he had never been in much danger. By now the effects of the wine, with the help of his huge exertion of inner force, had really taken hold. As his palms danced around the air, none of the master present was able get close to him.

Despite his astonishing medical skills, Divine Doctor Xue's kungfu left something to be desired. He was a true genius when it came to medicine, it was as if he knew it all without even being taught. Even so, he had been interested in martial arts as a small kid and his master was an even more amazing and knowledgeable master. However, a number of years ago, Divine Doctor Xue and all seven of his martial brothers were all kicked out by his master at the same time. Not willing to find another master, he instead took to another route, exchanging his medical services of kungfu. Picking up a move here, a skill here, rarely would you find a person with more knowledge in kungfu as he. But unfortunately, the broadness of his knowledge was also his downfall. In essence, he bit off more than he could chew and never really mastered any single kungfu. But because of his renowned medicinal skills, whenever he asked others about kungfu advice and such, people, not really being serious, would always add a couple of words of praise along with their critique so as to get on his good side. So he couldn't help but be a little arrogant, figuring that he had mastered most of all the martial arts in the world. But watching this fight, he realized that the speed with which Qiao Feng strikes and the force with which the strikes land were beyond anything he could have imagined before. His faced turned deathly pale and his heart were just about to leap out

of his throat, he was not even able to utter a sound, much less join in on the fight.

Flattening himself against the wall, he wanted to quietly sneak out for the life of him. But he could not bring himself to do it. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw XuanNan standing at his side. He suddenly remembered something and felt terrible about it.

"I was incredibly rude before, I ask for Reverend's forgiveness," he turned toward XuanNan.

XuanNan's attention was entirely fixated upon Qiao Feng and didn't hear Divine Doctor Xue at all. Only after he had repeated it twice did XuanNan finally snapped out of his trance.

"How were you rude?"

"I had said: 'Qiao Feng, all by himself, snuck into and out of ShaoLin last night without a single injury and still was able to kidnap a ShaoLin disciple with him. That's rather hard to believe.'" Divine Doctor Xue replied.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Well, with such amazing skills, Qiao Feng is indeed practically unmatched in the world. Only now do I realize that if he wanted to enter ShaoLin and to cause trouble, it is almost impossible to stop him." Divine Doctor Xue said in sincere voice.

He meant to be apologetic, but in XuanNan's ears, they sounded caustic.

"Hmph, Divine Doctor Xue want to see exactly what ShaoLin kungfu is all about?" XuanNan replied.

Not waiting for an answer, he slowly stepped forward and twirled his sleeves up. Underneath the sleeves, the sound of a fist strike could be heard shooting out. This was one of the Seventy Two Supreme Skills of ShaoLin, "Heaven Within the Sleeve," in which even though the sleeves are twirled up in a knot, the force of the fist would still shoot out from inside the sleeves. ShaoLin monks had always been based strictly to Buddhist teachings to learn and practice martial arts for

self-improvement. Even getting angry was forbidden, much less striking someone. But ShaoLin Sect had been the leader of martial arts in the world for centuries now, how could it not join in the fight? With the fist hidden within the sleeve, this “Heaven Within the Sleeve” was a very graceful move. The sleeve served as a screen for the force of the fist so the foe could not see where the fists were coming from, therefore making it easier to catch him off guard. But few people knew that the sleeves contain a huge variety of viciously strong moves. If the foe concentrate solely upon figuring out the moves of the fist behind the sleeves, then he would turn the diversion into the real thing and attack with the sleeve.

Qiao Feng was watching his attack as two sleeves flew up with the wind as if they were two huge sails. The force of the attack was truly amazing.

“‘Heaven Within the Sleeve’! Incredible!” Qiao Feng shouted as he, with a swoosh, swatted at the sleeves. The force of XuanNan's sleeves were applied over a large area while Qiao Feng's strike was concentrated. With a string of loud tearing sounds, the two forces met. Suddenly the hall seemed to be filled with gray colored butterflies.

Caught by surprise, everyone paused to collect themselves. Turned out that the gray butterflies was actually what used to be XuanNan's sleeves. When one turned one's gaze to XuanNan, one could see that his incredibly skinny arms were now completely exposed. When those two forces met head on, how could XuanNan's sleeves possibly take that kind of pressure? Thus they instantaneously torn to shreds. Now that he lost his sleeves, his sleeves naturally lost their “Heavens”. In his fury, his face turned a metallic green color. With a simple palm strike, Qiao Feng was able to defeat the very skill that had made him famous. Not able to stand such humiliation, waving his arms wildly, he charged without abandoned. Everyone recognized that what he was using was “Founder's Long Fist.” It was this fist skill, along

with a cane skill, that was used by the Founder of Song dynasty, Song TaiZu Zhao KuangYin to conquer and unite all of China under the Great Song. None of the Emperors since then had been as fierce or brave as Song TaiZu. These set of "Founder's Long Fist" and "Founder's Cane" was the most popular skills in the martial world, even if one didn't practice it, one was familiar with it.

Seeing such a famous ShaoLin monk, whose kungfu prowess was world famous, use such a plain, everyday skill surprised everyone. But after he had gone through three moves, everyone couldn't help but praise: "ShaoLin Sect's fame and acclaim is indeed well merited. The same 'Crossing Thousand Kilometers' would be so powerful when he uses it."

Because of their admiration, none of them seemed to mind how strange XuanNan looked without any sleeves.

Qiao Feng was surrounded by several scores of people, but as soon as XuanNan struck, the others, feeling that they were merely getting in the way, temporarily backed off. They still surrounded him in the middle of several rings, so as to not let escape. But everyone was completely mesmerized by the fight between XuanNan and him.

Noticing that others have backed off, an idea suddenly popped into Qiao Feng's head. With a loud swoosh, he struck out with his palm with a "Charging the Formation and Killing the General", yet another move from "Founder's Long Fist". The move looked completely natural and poised. There was a hint of give within the unyielding force of the strike as well as a hint of firmness within its softness. The state of perfection in mastery that all kungfu practitioners wish for had been clearly exemplified by this move. Of all the people gathered here in this "Gathering of Heroes", even if their kungfu skill weren't good, they were at least extremely knowledgeable, so everyone knew and understood the essence of "Founder's Long Fist." Upon seeing Qiao Feng's

move, quite a number of them could not help but cheer in admiration!

Many people immediately regretted the cheer, for it was in praise and support of their sworn enemy. But now that the sound had left their mouth, they couldn't take it back. Qiao Feng followed with a "New Moon's Majesty", which was just as refined, it was hard to tell whether this move was better or worse than his last move. Another cheer went up in the hall as a number people still couldn't hold it back in, but because several people realized the paradox the cheering created and held back, the cheer this time was quieter than last. Nevertheless, there were still quite a number of "oohs" and "ahhs" uttered in admiration. Everyone had been too involved in the battle with Qiao Feng to worry about anything else, but now that they were an outside observer, they finally realized how amazing his kungfu really was.

After Qiao Feng and XuanNan exchanged seven or eight moves, it had become obvious who was better. Despite the fact that both were using the same simple fist techniques, every one of Qiao Feng's moves came after XuanNan's move. As soon as XuanNan made a move, Qiao Feng would follow it up, but for some reason, maybe it was his youth or maybe he was just quicker, every one of Qiao Feng's moves would arrive at its objective before XuanNan's move. There's only sixty four moves in "Founder's Long Fist," but each one of them could effectively counter another. Qiao Feng would recognize his opponent's move before countering with the move that would cancel it. In this situation, how could XuanNan not lose? Everyone present understood the reason behind this, but to be able to "move later but arrive faster", especially when facing such a master such as XuanNan, had they not witnessed it themselves, none of them could have imagined it was possible.

Seeing XuanNan in trouble, Xuan Ji shouted: "You barbaric Khitan dog! How dare you use such despicable methods?"

"I'm using our country's founder's fist, how dare you call me 'despicable'?" Qiao Feng answered righteously.

Everyone immediately understood why he was using "Founder's Long Fist." If he had used other fist styles to defeat "Founder's Long Fist", then others would not say that it was because of his superior skills but rather accuse him of humiliating the founder of their country by using the skills of another race or country, which would only add to the hatred towards him. But now that everyone's using "Founder's Long Fist", the only thing that made difference was each person's skills and nothing else.

Seeing that XuanNan was moments away from being in mortal danger, Xuanji didn't bother to reply and just simply pointed his finger at Qiao Feng's Whirled-Pearl Point and attacked using ShaoLin Sect's acclaimed pressure point hitting skill, "Tangutan Buddha Finger." { Whirled Pearl Point is the part of the scalp where your hair goes into a whirl.}

Hearing the sound of his finger slashing through the air, Qiao Feng stepped aside to dodge the move.

"I have heard of the power of 'Tangutan Buddha Finger' for a long time, and it really is as powerful as the rumors say. You are using the kungfus of those Tangut barbarians against the martial arts of our Founder that I'm using. If you defeat me, then aren't you selling out to those barbarians and bringing shame to our great China?" Qiao Feng said.

Xuanji was quite taken aback by this. ShaoLin Sect's founder Bodhidharma was indeed a Tangut. Today everyone was teaming up against Qiao Feng for being of Khitan birth, yet because ShaoLin kungfu had been established in China for so long that every single sect or style of kungfu had at least a little bit of relationship with ShaoLin Sect. So much so that everyone had forgotten the close relationship ShaoLin has with the barbarians. But now, reminded by Qiao Feng's words, everyone remembered.

Some of the wiser people among the crowd wondered: "We treat Bodhidharma with reverence like a divinity, yet why

do we hate the Khitan people so much? They are all people of different races than us. Hmm, these two races are obviously different. The Tangut people do not slaughter us fellow Chinamen while the Khitan people are despicable and vicious. But in this sense, it doesn't mean that everyone of a different race is evil, there are good and bad people within them as well. But does that mean there are some good people within the Khitan?"

In reality, with such a huge fight at full swing, there were plenty of brutes who never thought such thoughts. Even though all of the more thoughtful people had thought such thoughts, they didn't have time to dwell over it, only feeling a little bit at the bottom of their hearts that: "Qiao Feng may not have to be killed, and we may not be as in the right."

Fighting two against one, XuanNan and Xuanji still had to defend more than they attacked. Frustrated by the fact that whatever he did was always countered by his foe, XuanNan changed his style as soon as Xuanji joined him in the fight, switching instead to ShaoLin's "Arhat Fist".

"So you are going to use the martial arts of the Tangut? Let's see which is better, your foreign kungfu better or that of our Great Song!" Qiao Feng coldly snickered as his fist were loudly swung about in the style of "Founder's Long Fist."

Everybody present had a sick feeling in their stomach. They were attacking Qiao Feng because he was a foreigner, yet instead they were using foreign kungfu while he was using the fist of the founder of their country.

"Who cares about fist style? This man killed his father, his mother, and his master. He deserves to die!" Zhao QianSun suddenly shouted as he charged into the fight, followed closely by Grandpa Tan, Grandma Tan, Elder Xu, Elder Cheng, and scores of others.

Everyone of them were kungfu masters, and despite the great number of them, their attack was well organized,

essentially taking turns one after another attacking Qiao Feng.

Fighting them off, Qiao Feng declared: "You say that I am Khitan, but then Grandpa Qiao SanKui and Grandma Qiao can't be my father or mother anymore. Forget the fact that they always treated me with great love and care without the slightest intention of harm, even if I did kill them, how could I be guilty of 'killing my father and mother'? Reverend XuanKu is my savior and master, if ShaoLin Sect admits that he's my master, then I would be a ShaoLin disciple. How could you gang up on a ShaoLin disciple like this?"

"Hmph! How could you stoop so low as to resort to such sophistry and equivocation?" Xuanji replied.

"If it is justified and consistent, then it isn't sophistry or equivocation. If you guys don't regard me as a ShaoLin disciple, then don't accuse me of killing my master. As the saying goes, 'One could always trump up charges if one's out to condemn me' (yu jia zhi zui, he huan wu ci). If you guys want to kill me, then just do it like a man. Why bother accusing me of all these inconsistent and deceitful charges?"

Even as he was debating, he never stopped fighting: fist hitting Shan ShuShan, kick landing on Zhao QianSun, elbowing a green clothed man that he didn't see the face of, and palm striking a white bearded old man that he didn't know the name of. While arguing, he knocked down four people in a row. Knowing that these people weren't bad people, he held back with his strikes, of the eighteen or so people that he had knocked down, none had lost his life. As for his brothers in the Beggar Clan, he didn't even touch them, when Elder Xu attacked him, he just ducked out of the way.

But with so many people at the gathering, as soon as he knocked ten people down, another ten people took their place. "If this keeps up, I'll eventually die of exhaustion. It's probably the best to find a place to escape first." Qiao Feng

figured as he carefully surveyed for an escape route as he fought.

Zhao QianSun was lying on the ground, unable to move. But he was still able to see that Qiao Feng was looking to escape.

"Everyone, attack him! Don't let this despicable dog bastard get away!" He shouted.

Adrenaline pumping, Qiao Feng could feel his fury gradually taking over, hearing Zhao QianSun's words finally sent him over the edge.

"This dog bastard is going to start off his killing spree with you!" He howled as his palm came screaming down upon Zhao QianSun.

"No!" XuanNan and Xuanji simultaneously shouted as both of them stuck out with their right hand, trying to save Zhao QianSun's life.

Suddenly a human form appeared in mid-air as a sickening scream reverberated around the hall. XuanNan and Xuanji's blows landed on the person's chest as Qiao Feng's palm landed squarely in the middle of the back. Caught in the middle of those three powerful and violent forces, the person's ribs immediately shattered and internal organs collapsed. Blood gushing out of the person's mouth, the body collapsed onto the ground like a pile of mud.

Not only was XuanNan and Xuanji shocked, Qiao Feng was caught by surprise as well. Turned out that this person was Fast Sabre Qi Liu. He had been hanging in midair for quite some time now. Rattling back and forth, he was finally able to pry loose his sabre and fall. Quite unfortunately, he just happened to fall in between those three strikes, it was as if two gigantic steel slabs came slamming together on him. There was no chance of him surviving.

"Amida Buddha," XuanNan was first to say something. "Qiao Feng, have you not sinned enough?"

"I only am half responsible! You two are just as responsible as I for his death, why are you guys dumping it

all on me?" Qiao Feng screamed in fury.

"Amida Buddha. Amida Buddha. Had you not sinned first, would there have even been a fight today?" XuanNan replied.

"Alright, ok, it's all my fault. So what!" Qiao Feng screamed back as he finally let his anger take over, which instantly turned him into a wild beast.

He grabbed somebody with his right hand, who happened to be Shan Zheng's second son Shan ZhongShan. Snatching his sabre with his left hand, he let go of his body and immediately slammed down with his right hand, caving in the top of Shan ZhongShan's head. The rest of the people gasped in horror and anger.

Now that the killing started, Qiao Feng's fighting became even more desperate and violent. Slashing ferociously with the sabre in his left hand and switching periodically between palm and fist with his right, he was not to be stopped. Slowly but surely, the white walls was becoming more and more covered with small droplets of blood as the hall began to fill up with corpses. By now he did not worry about past friendships anymore, even that of the Beggar Clan. Not even waiting to make out his foe's faces anymore, his eyes were blood-shot as he killed whoever that he happens into. It was like this that Elder Xi died under his sabre.

Of the people that were at the gathering, nine out ten of them had killed before. After all, to become known in the martial world required more than just making friends and talking a good show. And those who had not killed before had witnessed such events many times before. But none of them had ever seen such a violent and horrifying battle as the one that was unfolding in front of their eyes. There was only one foe, but he was like a crazed tiger, a possessed demon, charging back and forth, attacking and chopping left and right indiscriminately. Many a master had stepped up to challenge him, but all were mowed down by his faster, stronger, fiercer, better moves. Nobody present was a

coward who was afraid to die, but in front of them was a crazed opponent whose kungfu skills nobody could stand against as their eyes were filled with images of blood and flesh flying across the hall, of human heads rolling on the floor and their ears were filled with the desperate and stunned screams of death, most of them wanted to run away as soon and as quickly as possible. Was Qiao Feng guilty or wasn't he? They did not care for it anymore.

Seeing the situation quickly deteriorate, the Brothers You each brought up their circular shield with their left hand and a weapon in their right hand, one had a short spear while the other had a sabre. With a whistle, the two of them attacked Qiao Feng from two sides with the shields protecting their body.

Even though Qiao Feng was letting it all out for the fight, he was still completely coherent and not a least bit panicky as he easily and quickly picked apart every opponent's move, hence why he still hadn't been wounded. Noticing that the You Brothers were charging in, he immediately chopped down the two men by his side and, trying to grab the initiative, attacked You Ji. You Ji brought his shield up at the last moment. With a loud clang, Qiao Feng's sabre bounced back. Upon closer inspection, he noticed that the blade of the sabre had curled up, rendering it completely useless. The shields in the You Brothers' hands were melded using the finest of metals that had been melted and reshaped over hundreds of times, even priceless swords could not penetrate them, much less that ordinary iron sabre that Qiao Feng grabbed out of Shan ZhungShan's hands.

Immediately after deflecting his foe's attack away, You Ji immediately struck the short spear in his right hand from underneath the shield, like a snake striking out of its hole, aiming towards Qiao Feng's stomach. At this precise a moment, there was a cold flash as the shield that was in You Ju's hand came flying in at Qiao Feng's torso.

With one glance, Qiao Feng could tell that the edges of the shield were incredibly sharp, like those of an ax. If it hit him, it would surely slice him in two. A truly vicious move.

“Excellent!” Qiao Feng shouted as he threw down the sabre in his hand and punched out with his left fist.

With a tremendous bang, his fist landed squarely in the middle of You Ji's shield. He then shot out his right fist, which was followed by an equally deafening bang as it hit You Ju's shield directly at its center.

The You Brothers felt half of their bodies go numb as Qiao Feng's overwhelming power shook them to their very core. Stars appeared in their eyes as they, losing all their strength in their arms, dropped their shields and weapons onto the floor. The place where the base of their thumb and index finger came together bursted and split open, covering their hands in blood.

“Great, thanks for lending me two weapons!” Qiao Feng chuckled. He bent down, picked up the shields, and gave each a twirl. The shields were truly amazing devices that could be used to attack or defend. Several dying screams went up as five people fell by the shields. The You Brothers' faces looked shamed and defeated.

“Brother, remember what master said? 'Shield lives, we live. Shield dies, we die!'” You Ji shouted.

“After such humiliation, how could we brothers have any face left to live on this world?” You Ju replied.

With a slight nod toward each other, both of them picked up their weapons and stabbed them into their hearts, dying instantly.

“No!” Everyone shouted in dismay. But with Qiao Feng waving his shields around as he was, who had enough courage to venture to within ten meters of him to drag the bodies out. Who could have ventured within ten meters of him?

The screams of a young man could be heard above the chaos: “Daddy! Daddy!” It was that of You Ju's son, You

DanZhi.

Qiao Feng paused in shock, never expecting that the You Brothers, the Masters of JuXian Mansion would commit suicide. His back felt cold as he suddenly sobered up a great deal.

"Why did you do that, Brothers You? Here, let me return these shields back to you." Qiao Feng said with regret as he bent down and laid the shields at the You Brother's side.

He hadn't quite straightened himself back up yet when a girl suddenly shouted: "Watch out!"

Qiao Feng immediately side-stepped to the left letting a green flash shoot by as a sword barely missed him. Had it not been for Ah-Zhu's timely warning, even though he probably would not have been hit, he would have been at a very disadvantageous position. The perpetrator of the sneak attack was Grandpa Tan, who, as soon as he missed, dashed away to safety.

As everyone was concentrated on fighting Qiao Feng, Ah-Zhu curled up in a corner as she became weaker and weaker. Seeing everyone ganging up on Qiao Feng, remembering that it was because he was trying to save her that he put himself into such great danger, she could not but be greatly moved and worried. Noticing Grandpa Tan sneaking up from behind Qiao Feng as he laid down the shields, she had to call out and warn him.

"Oh is that it, you little devil!" Grandma Tan was furious. "We don't bother you so you go and help him?" With a flash, her palm came crashing down at the top of Ah-Zhu's head.

Just as her palm was about to hit Ah-Zhu, Qiao Feng arrived. Grabbing Grandma Tan by her collar from behind, he forcefully pulled Grandma Tan to a stop and tossed her aside, sending her crashing onto a priceless carved pear wood chair. Even though she was not hit, Ah-Zhu was severely frightened and her body just gave out.

"The life force in her body is about to be completely drained." Qiao Feng thought to himself. "But at this moment,

how could I help her?”

“Her life force is about to run out, are you going to prolong her life with your own inner force?” Divine Doctor Xue coldly spoke out. “If she stops breathing, then even real divine goddesses couldn't bring her back to life.”

Qiao Feng was in a bind, he knew that what Divine Doctor Xue said was the truth, but if he help Ah-Zhu, the people around him would immediately bear down upon him. Some of the people lost sons, others lost friends, so none of them would be the least bit hesitant at finishing him off. But was he supposed to just watch her die and do nothing?

He had taken such a risk to get her here to Gathering Virtue Mansion and it would be a shame if it was all for naught, if she died because she ran out of life force before Divine Doctor Xue could treat her. However, if he was going to keep her alive by transferring his inner force into her, it would be the equivalent of exchanging his own life for hers. For all she was, Ah-Zhu was still just merely a maid that he met in his travels. He had no real feelings toward her, just that helping people out and saving people were something that he'd normally do. But to exchange his life for hers was too much to ask.

“She's not a relative of mine, and I am not beholden to her at all. I had tried my best to get her here and done all that I could. I got to get out of here as soon as possible. Whether or not Divine Doctor Xue could save her would be just dependent on her fate and luck.” Qiao Feng thought.

So he picked the two shields up from the floor and continuously performed “Roc Spreading Wings” several times, creating two rings of white light around him that rolled towards the exit as he charged.

Despite the numerical advantage, Qiao Feng's moves were too vicious and those two shields too great of weapons. So nobody was able to get within several meters of Qiao Feng's body to stop him.

Having made it to the exit in several steps, Qiao Feng had just stepped over the threshold with his left foot, he suddenly heard a raspy old man shout defiantly: "Kill the girl first, then let's worry about getting him for revenge!"

It was Iron Faced Judge Shan Zheng that said that. His eldest son Shan BoShan immediately responded with a "yes" and lifted up his sabre in preparation to bring it down upon Ah-Zhu's head. In the heat of the moment, Qiao Feng didn't have to think and just threw the shield in his left hand out. It whirled violently as it exploded through the air.

"Watch out!" Seven or eight different people shouted at the same time. Shan BoShan immediately brought his sabre around in an attempt to parry. Qiao Feng's toss was too forceful and the edge of the shield too sharp.

"Crash!" Shan BoShan's body and sabre were cut in half. Still going strong, the shield kept on flying. "Zeng!" It cut through one of the huge columns that supported the hall, sending dust and roof tiles into the air and onto the ground.

Shan Zheng and the three of his sons who were still alive screamed in sadness and fury. But with Qiao Feng standing there in all his menace and glory, they did not dare to go up to him. Instead, they, along with six or seven others, charged toward Ah-Zhu.

"Have you no shame!" Qiao Feng cursed at them and let loose four straight palm strikes, which shook those people enough to stop them.

Quickly flying to her side, Qiao Feng picked Ah-Zhu up with his left arm and shielded her from the others with the shield he had left.

"Master Qiao, I'm not going to make it." Ah-Zhu pleaded. "Don't worry about me, just... leave!"

Seeing so many "heroes" stooping so low as to pick on Ah-Zhu, a defenseless and dying girl, aroused Qiao Feng's indomitable sense of pride.

"Now that it has come to this, they would never let you live. Let's die together!" He replied in a booming voice.

Reaching out with his right hand, he snatched a sword from someone and began slicing and dicing his way towards the door. Carrying Ah-Zhu, his movements were slowed on top of the fact that he had now one less hand to fight with, putting him in a very disadvantageous position. But he had long put his life on the backburner as he made the sword dance around him. He had only taken two steps before a pain shot up from his back, someone had slashed his back with a sabre.

He lifted his leg and kicked back, sending that man flying for almost one hundred meters before crashing into another person, killing both of them instantly. At that moment, a spear stabbed Qiao Feng on his right shoulder, which was soon followed by a sword thrusting into his right chest.

Qiao Feng let out a thunderous howl and screamed: "Qiao Feng would rather kill himself than to die in the hands of you low lives!"

But the other fighters were, by now, so completely absorbed in the fight that there was no way that they were going to allow him the luxury of ending his own life. A dozen or so people charged up together. Gathering his strength and spirit, Qiao Feng suddenly reached out with his right hand, grabbed Xuanji by the "Mid-Chest Pressure Point", and lifted his body up in the air. Everyone involuntarily gasped in shock and instinctively took a couple of steps back.

His pressure point being hit, Xuanji was completely paralyzed and could not move despite his incredible kungfu skills. Looking down, he saw that his neck was only centimeters away from the edge of the shield, Qiao Feng only needs to lift his left arm a little or give his right arm a push and his head would have been chopped off. Resigning himself to his fate, Xuanji sighed and closed his eyes, awaiting death.

The incredible pain on his back, his chest, and his right shoulder felt like someone had poured acid on the wounds. Qiao Feng gritted his teeth and said: "All the martial arts in

my body had originally come from ShaoLin. How can I kill a high monk of ShaoLin? Qiao Feng is doomed to die today anyway, what's the good in killing one more?"

Gently, he put Xuanji down onto the ground and let go. "Well? Come on! Finish this!" He said at the top of his lungs.

The fighters looked at each other, all moved by his courage and spirit. Nobody could bring himself to take his life. Still some more thought: "He wouldn't even harm Xuanji, how could he possibly take the life of his master Reverend XuanKu?"

However, Iron Faced Judge Shan Zheng, heartbroken and furious over the death of two of his sons, did not hesitate. With a loud yell, he charged up and thrust his sabre directly at Qiao Feng's heart.

Qiao Feng knew that with his severe wounds, he could not possibly fight his way out anymore, so he just stood there motionlessly. In that instant, an infinite amount of thoughts flashed through his mind: "Am I really Han or am I Khitan? Who killed my parents and master? I have always lived honorably and tried to do the right thing in my life, why did I kill all these heroes and good men today for no good reason? I wanted to save Ah-Zhu, but ended up giving my own life away, would all the heroes in the world laugh at me for such stupid actions?"

Seeing Shan Zheng's dark and contorted face, eyes bugging out and charging at him with a sabre aimed at his heart, Qiao Feng's heart was suddenly overwhelmed by sadness and anger. Not able to hold it back anymore, he suddenly snapped out and howled up into the heavens like a proud and dying beast.

Chapter 20: Standing in Sadness at Yanmen, No Word was Left on the Cliff

Fan translation by forgot password [Second Edition]

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Hearing this deafening bellow by Qiao Feng, Shan Zheng suddenly felt dizzy, stumbled and was unable to stand firmly on his feet. The extraordinary people could not help but take several steps backward either. Shan Xiaoshan rushed up from one side and thrust straight forward with his saber.

The tip of the saber was less than one chi (33.33 cm) away from Qiao Feng's chest but he had no intention of resisting. Seeing that, and not having the heart to look on, the people from the Beggar Society such as Elder Wu and Bai Shijing all closed their eyes.

All of a sudden, there was a 'hu' sound in mid-air, a person leaped down in an exceptionally rapid fashion and bumped themselves on Shan Xiaoshan's steel saber just in time. Shan Xiaoshan was unable to withstand this great force therefore his arm dropped. Amidst the simultaneous shocked exclamations by the extraordinary people, another person jumped down in an equally rapid manner but their head went ahead of their feet. This person bumped into the head of Shan Xiaoshan just in time. With a 'peng' sound the tops of two skulls hit against each other and the heads of both people were burst open at the same time.

Only now did everyone see clearly that the two people who had just successively leaped down were the people who had been guarding on the roof to prevent Qiao Feng from escaping. But they had been captured and thrown down like missiles by someone. The hall was immediately plunged into chaos with everyone exclaiming and shouting. Suddenly a long rope was flung down from a corner of the roof with fierce force and swept horizontally towards the head of

everyone. When the extraordinary people raised their weapons to block the long rope, the tip of it suddenly turned back. It then wound around Qiao Feng's waist and immediately lifted him up.

At this moment, the three wounds on Qiao Feng's body were bleeding profusely and his left hand which was carrying A'Zhu no longer had the slightest strength, hence when he was wound around by the long rope, A'Zhu immediately rolled down on the ground. Everyone saw that at the other end of the long rope was a man in black who was standing on the roof and had an imposing stature. His face was being covered with black cloth with only his eyes shown.

That man clasped Qiao Feng to his side using his left arm, flung the long rope and made it wind around a very high flagpole outside the entrance of Juxian Manor. The extraordinary people shouted loudly. In a very short time, a great variety of missiles such as steel darts, sleeve-hidden arrows, flying knives, iron awls, flying-locust stones, and hand-swung arrows were thrown at Qiao Feng and that man. That gritty man in black pulled the long rope, leisurely got off the ground and landed on the top of the flagpole. Teng-teng, pai-pai, ca-ca sounds were heard continuously, dozens of missiles had hit the top of the flagpole. Everyone only saw that the long rope was flung from the top of flagpole and wound around a big tree which was eight or nine zhang (3.333 m) away. Clasping Qiao Feng, that man swung off the top of the flagpole. In an instant he already passed that big tree and landed on a place which was ten zhang away from the flagpole on the ground. He then flung the long rope again, winding it around another distant big tree. After hoisting and landing in this way several times, he already disappeared into thin air.

The extraordinary people gasped with astonishment and looked at each other. They only heard horse hoofbeats

galloping farther and farther, it was already too late to chase after him.

Qiao Feng had suffered serious injuries but he was still in full command of his senses. He had seen clearly every act and every move how this man had used the long rope to save himself from danger, hence he felt deeply grateful to him for saving his life and thought: 'Flinging the rope accurately and powerfully like this, I can do as well. But using the long rope as a weapon and swinging it to attack dozens of people at the same time, I can't use this 'Celestial Maiden Scatters Flowers' stance in flexible whip techniques as perfectly as he did.'

The man in black put him on horseback. Both of them rode the same horse and went northward. That man took out jinchuang medicine (medicine for treating wounds caused by metal objects) and applied it onto Qiao Feng's three wounds. Having shed too much blood Qiao Feng was very weak, hence he almost passed out several times, but every such time he took a breath and circulated his internal energy, his spirit then rose back. That man urged the horse straight northwest. After going for a while, the path became more and more rugged, afterward, there was no longer any path and the horse merely went by stumbling over disorderly piles of rocks.

After going for more than one hour farther, the horse could no longer walk, that man then carried Qiao Feng horizontally in his hands, got off the horse and climbed up a mountain peak. Qiao Feng's body was very heavy but that man carried him effortlessly. Even though they were in a very precipitous place, he easily used the long rope to wind around branches to jump over ravines. After that man had passed eight dangerous ravines in a row, he went down all the way, going deep into an abyss from which the sky could not be seen. Finally, he stopped and put Qiao Feng down.

Qiao Feng strained to stand firmly and said: 'This great debt of gratitude can't be paid using words. Kind brother,

could you please let Qiao Feng see your true face?’

That man’s pair of glaring eyes roved over his face. After a long time, he said: ‘In the cave, there’re enough dry provisions to use in half a month. You stay here to care for your injuries. The enemies won’t be able to come here.’

Qiao Feng replied: ‘Yes!’ and thought: ‘Hearing the voice of this man, it seems he’s not young anymore.’

That man sized Qiao Feng up for a while then suddenly waved his right hand, with a ‘pai’ sound, he gave Qiao Feng a slap in the face. His action was very fast, and firstly, Qiao Feng had not expected that the man would hit him, and secondly, this palm attack was executed extremely brilliantly, therefore he was unable to dodge it.

That man followed it up with the second palm attack. The two palms attacks were only a flash apart, however once Qiao Feng had this marginal amount of time, how could he let the man hit him again? But because the man had saved his life, Qiao Feng did not want to fight him; moreover he had no strength to dodge, hence he extended his left forefinger and put it next to his own cheek, pointing at the center of the palm of that man.

This forefinger pointed at the ‘Laogong acupuncture point’ in the center of that man’s palm; if this palm attack by him kept coming, then when the palm had not yet reached Qiao Feng’s cheek, it would have already bumped into the forefinger first. When the palm of that man’s was less than one chi away from Qiao Feng’s cheek, he immediately turned it over and used the back of the hand to attack. This change of stances was done exceptionally fast. Qiao Feng also very quickly moved the forefinger and pointed at the ‘Erjian acupuncture point’ on the back of the man’s hand.

That man let out a stream of laughs, forcefully withdrew his right hand then chopped horizontally with his left hand. Qiao Feng extended his left forefinger and pointed at the ‘Houhuo acupuncture point’ on the edge of his palm. The

arm of that man was suddenly lifted a little bit but kept coming with no decrease in momentum. Without delay, Qiao Feng moved his finger and pointed at the 'Qianggu acupuncture point' on the edge of that man's palm. In an instant, the two palms of that man danced in the air, changing stances more than ten times in a row. Qiao Feng only defended and did not attack; his fingers were always pointed so that if the man hit him, the acupuncture points on his palms would bump into the fingers first. That man had taken Qiao Feng by surprise with the first palm attack and hit him, but after that he was unable to hit Qiao Feng again. The two of them attacked and defended without touching each other but every stance was a top-class martial arts skill that was rarely seen at the present time.

After that man used the twentieth stance, seeing that Qiao Feng was still able to change stances very fast and locate the acupuncture points very accurately despite having suffered serious injuries, he suddenly withdrew his palms, jumped backward and said: 'No one is more stupid than you are. I shouldn't have saved you.' Qiao Feng said: 'I'm sincerely waiting for your instructions.'

That man scolded: 'You stinking dumbass. Having practiced and become unequaled in martial arts under heaven, why did you wanna waste your life for a skeletal chick? She isn't your relative or friend, didn't do you any favor or have any relationship with you, and isn't a gorgeous woman either; she's just a lowly slave girl, nothing more. Why on Earth there's such an idiot like you?'

Qiao Feng let out a sigh and said: 'Savior, your criticisms are true. It was really senseless of Qiao Feng to do this useless thing with my useful body. But at that moment I couldn't hold back my fury, my barbaric nature broke out so I wasn't thinking of the consequences.'

That man said: 'Ha-ha, so it was because of the barbaric nature breaking out.' He turned his head toward the sky and let out a long stream of laughs.

Qiao Feng felt that there were a lot of desolation and indignation in his long stream of laughs. Suddenly that man jumped to his feet and leaped out for more than one zhang. With just a slight shake of his body, he disappeared behind a big rock. Qiao Feng called out: 'Savior, savior!' But he only saw that the man continuously leaped then went around past a ravine, he was already very far. As soon as Qiao Feng took a stride, he tottered. He hastily stretched out his hands and put them against the cliff to support his body.

After composing himself, he turned around and really saw a cave behind the stone wall. Supporting himself on the cliff, he slowly walked into the cave. He only saw a lot of dry provisions such as cooked meat, roast rice, jujubes, peanuts, and dried fish put on the ground; what was even better was that there was a big jar of wine. When he opened the jar, the bouquet rushed into his nose. He reached into the jar and took out a scoop of wine to drink. The wine had a sweet taste; it was a first-class wine. Qiao Feng felt grateful: 'It's rare to see someone as thoughtful as this savior is. He knows that I like drinking and even has wine for me in here. It's hard to go on the mountain paths yet he carried this big jar of wine to here. Didn't this take too much trouble?'

The jinchuang medicine that man had applied onto him was very effective. At this moment the wounds had already stopped bleeding. Several shichen (1 shichen = two hours) later, the pain was gradually relieved. He was a robust man with a profound internal energy and the wounds he had suffered were merely external, therefore even though they were not minor injuries, after seven or eight days they were already almost half healed.

During these seven or eight days, he only thought about two matters: 'Who's the enemy that harmed me? Who's that savior?' Both of these people had very outstanding martial arts, perhaps not below those of his own at all. In wulin, the people who possessed these skills were very rare and could be counted on the fingers of one hand. He bent his fingers

and could count every one of them out, but after thinking carefully he found that none of them was similar to these two people. It was understandable that he could not guess who the enemy was, but because he had exchanged twenty stances with the savior, he should be able to guess what school his martial arts belonged to. However, all the stances used by that man had been completely normal yet at the same time had shown enormous skills in their simplicity, just like the 'Founder's Long Fist' Qiao Feng himself had used at Juxian Manor, hence the stances did not give away anything about his identity.

In two days, he already drank up that jar of wine. Enduring until the twentieth day, he felt that the wounds had seventy or eighty percent healed up. By now, his craving for wine had become so strong that he could no longer keep enduring. Thinking that he could already jump over the ravines without any difficulty, he went out of the cave and tramped over hills and dales to return to Jianghu.

He thought: 'A'Zhu has fallen into their hands. If she's dead, then she's already dead. If she's still alive, there's also no need for me to take care of her again. The most important and urgent thing at the moment is finding out what kind of man I am. Dad, mom and master passed away in one day so the mystery of my origin has become harder to clear up. I must go to the outside of Yanmen Pass to see the writing left behind on that stone wall.'

After calculating, he went northwest. When arriving in a town, the first thing he did was drinking twenty bowls of wine. In only three days, the remaining several taels of silver fragments were all changed into good wine, which he drank until nothing left.

At that time, Great Song was ruling Central Plains. It divided the country into fifteen regions. The main capital was Daliang; Dongjing (the eastern capital) was Kaifeng prefecture; Xijing (the western capital) was Luoyang in Henan prefecture; Nanjing (the southern capital) was

Songzhou; Daming was Beijing (the northern capital, and NOT today's Beijing); in total, there were four regional capitals. For the moment, Qiao Feng was in Ruzhou in the Xijing region. That day, when he got to Liang County, his silver had been used up; hence he snuck in the county's office and stole several hundred taels of silver from the public treasury during the night. On the way he ate and drank a lot; chickens, ducks, fish, sorghum, and good wine all were paid by government officials of Great Song. One day, he arrived in Daizhou in the Hedong region.

Yanmen Pass was located thirty li (0.5 km) to the north of Daizhou on the rugged Yanmen path. Previously, when carrying out heroic deeds in jianghu, Qiao Feng had also been to here. But at that time, due to having important matters, he had gone past it without paying attention. When he arrived in Daizhou, it was already early eleven in the morning. He had a quick meal and drank around ten bowls of wine in the city then went out of it and headed north.

His steps were fast therefore he traveled these thirty li in less than one hour. When he had climbed up the mountain, he saw that both the eastern cliff and the western cliff were high and steep; the path between them was winding and rugged. This was really a very dangerous place. He thought: 'Wild geese travel south and return north can't fly over the high mountains, all of them gotta go between the two peaks, so this place is called Yanmen (Wild Geese's Gate). Today I came here from the south, if the writing on the stone wall states clearly that I'm really a Khitan then after I go out of Yanmen Pass this time, I'll forever become a man in the North of the pass and no longer enter the pass again. I'll be inferior to the wild geese that, once every year, go to the south from the north and return.' Thinking to here, he could not help but feel grieved.

Yanmen Pass was an important military post of Great Song's in the north. There were more than forty passes in Shanxi, and Yanmen was the most imposing and secure one.

Beyond several tens of li (0.5 km) outside the pass was the Liao Empire. Because there was always a large number of soldiers defending below the pass, Qiao Feng thought if he went out through it, he would unavoidably be interrogated and examined by the guarding officers and soldiers. Therefore he made a detour via the high ridge in the west of the pass.

After reaching the highest peak, he scanned widely around but saw nothing other than mountains and mountains, the towering Mt. Wutai in the east, the Ningwu Mountain range in the west, Mt. Zhengyang and Mt. Shigu standing upright in the south, and in the north being Mt. Shuozhou and Mt. Mayi. With seemingly boundless long slopes and steep mountain sides combined with vast lonely cold forests, the scene was very gloomy. Qiao Feng remembered that while going past Yanmen Pass that year he had heard his comrades say that General Li Mu of the State of Zhao during the Warring States Period and General Zhi Du of the Han Dynasty both had garrisoned Yanmen to defend against Xiongnu invasions. If he himself was really Xiongnu and a Khitan descendant, then for the last thousands of years, the people who had been invading China all were his ancestors.

He looked at the terrain in the north and thought: 'That day when people such as Chief Wang and Zhao Qiansun ambushed the Khitan warriors outside Yanmen Pass, they must have chosen the most advantageous mountain slope within more than ten li of here. No place has better terrain than the mountain slope in the corner to the northwest of here does. Ten to one they set up the ambush there.'

He quickly ran down the mountain and went to that mountain slope. Suddenly he felt a burst of causeless sorrow. He only saw that there was a large piece of rock on that mountain slope. Zhiguang dashi had said the extraordinary people of Central Plains had hid behind a large rock and

shot poisonous missiles out. It seemed it was this large piece of rock.

There was a deep ravine several steps outside the mountain path. Clouds and mists enveloped the ravine, making it impossible for anyone to see the bottom. Qiao Feng thought: 'If Zhiguang dashi's words are true, then after my mother was killed by them, my father jumped into the ravine to commit suicide from here. After jumping into the mouth of the ravine, he couldn't bear to make me die with him so he tossed me up onto the body of Chief Wang's. He... what did he write on the stone wall?'

Qiao Feng turned around and looked at the cliff on the right-hand side, only seeing that it was naturally flat and glossy, but right in the middle of the big stone wall, there were full of cuts caused by axes and chisels. Obviously, someone had deliberately scraped away the writing that had been left behind.

Qiao Feng stood in a trance in front of the stone wall then suddenly he could not refrain from getting furious. He only wanted to brandish a saber and raise his palms to massacre, but he suddenly remembered one matter: 'When I left the Beggar Society, I broke Shan Zheng's steel saber and vowed that it didn't matter if I was a Han or a Khitan, I definitely wouldn't kill any Han person. But at Juxian Manor, how many people did I kill in one go? Yet in this moment I wanted to kill again, wouldn't this seriously violate the vow? Alas, when things already became like that, if I hadn't offended other people, they would offend me. If I had passively waited for death and let other people cut and kill me, how could it be the action of a true man?'

He had run thousands of li to here because he wanted to find out about his own origin but from beginning to end he had not achieved the slightest result. Getting more and more irascible, he shouted loudly: 'I'm not a Han, I'm not a Han! I'm a Khitan barbarian, I'm a Khitan barbarian!' He then raised his palms and repeatedly hit the stone wall. He

only heard the valley resounding with his shouts, each of which echoed back: '...not a Han, not a Han! ...Khitan barbarian, Khitan barbarian!'

Stone bits from the stone wall scattered all around. The grief and fury in Qiao Feng's heart could not be expressed, he kept striking out with one palm attack after another, it seemed he wanted to vent all kinds of grievances he had suffered for the past more than one month on the stone wall. Afterward, his palms bled, the marks of his gory fingers were printed on the stone wall one by one, but he kept on hitting.

While he was hitting, suddenly he heard the pleasing clear voice of a girl from behind: 'Great Master Qiao, if you keep hitting, this mountain peak would be knocked down by you.'

Startled, Qiao Feng turned his head around and saw a young girl standing under a flower tree beside the mountain slope, leaning against it. The girl was wearing a reddish gown and was smiling. She was no one other than A'Zhu.

That day he had saved her merely because he had been stimulated by the indignation of that moment but in fact he had not cared about this little maid. Afterward, busy enough with his own affairs, he had ignored and forgotten the matter concerning her life and death. Surprisingly, she suddenly appeared here, hence Qiao Feng was astonished, but after that he also felt happy. He went upwards to greet her, laughed and said: 'A'Zhu, have you gotten well?' However, because his mood suddenly changed from being furious to being happy, his smiling expression was rather forced.

A'Zhu said: 'Great Master Qiao, how are you?' She gazed at Qiao Feng for a short while then suddenly threw herself into his bosom and sobbed: 'Great Master Qiao, I... I've been waiting for you here for five days and five nights. I only feared that you wouldn't come. You... You've really come. Thank Heavens, in the end you're safe and sound.'

She said these few sentences in an intermittent manner, but her words were filled with gladness and solace. As soon as Qiao Feng heard them, he knew that she cared about himself very much. He felt moved and asked: 'Why have you been waiting for me here for five days and five nights? I... How did you know that I'd come here?'

A'Zhu slowly raised her head. Suddenly remembering that she was leaning against the bosom of a man, she blushed and took two steps backward. When she recalled that just a moment ago she had been unable to control her feelings, her face reddened even more. She suddenly turned around and went quickly to the back of the tree.

Qiao Feng called out: 'Hey, A'Zhu, A'Zhu, what are you doing?' A'Zhu did not reply. She only felt that her heart was beating chaotically. After a good while, she walked out from behind the tree, her face still looked rather embarrassed. For the moment, she stammered and was unable to say clearly. Finding her expression strange, Qiao Feng said: 'A'Zhu, if you have something that is hard to say, feel free to tell me. The two of us are friends in adversity who went through life-and-death situations together, what do you still worry about?' A'Zhu's face reddened again. She said: 'Nothing.'

Qiao Feng gently pulled her shoulder and turned her face towards the sunlight. He saw that even though her countenance was still very haggard, a reddish color could vaguely be seen under her pale cheeks; they no longer had the gray color of when she had been seriously injured that day. Qiao Feng then put out his finger to feel her pulse. A'Zhu's whole body shook when her wrist touched his finger. Qiao Feng asked: 'What's wrong? You're still unwell?' A'Zhu blushed again and hurriedly said: 'No, no... nothing.' Qiao Feng checked her pulse but found that it was beating steadily and comfortably. He praised: 'Divine Doctor Xue could bring the dying back to life. He really lives up to his reputation.'

A'Zhu said: 'Luckily, only because your good friend Elder Bai Shijing promised to teach Divine Doctor Xue seven stances of the 'Silk Thread Winding Grasping Hand Technique' did he treat my injury. More importantly, they wanted to interrogate me about the whereabouts of that master in black. If I had died at that moment, they wouldn't have been able to ask anything. When the condition of my injury got better a bit, every day seven or eight people came and asked me: 'What's the relationship between the evil traitor Qiao Feng and you?' 'Where has he escaped to?' 'Who's the man in black that saved him?' At first I didn't know anything about these matters, but when I honestly said that I didn't know, they insisted that I was lying. They also threatened me a lot, saying they'd starve and torture me. So, I secretly made up some stories and told them. The story about the master in black was the most absurd. One day I said he was from Mt. Kunlun, the next day I again said he had once learned martial arts in the East Sea. It was very interesting talking nonsense to them.' Saying to here, recalling that during those days she had talked nonsense to and made a fool of many current well-known heroes and extraordinary people, she still had some lingering enjoyment, and a smiling expression appeared on her face, making it look like a spring flower which had just opened.

Qiao Feng smiled and said: 'Did they believe you?' A'Zhu said: 'Some did and some didn't. The majority of them half believed half doubted. I guessed they didn't know the identity of the master in black either and no one would be able to argue that my words were incorrect, so my stories became more and more curious, making them very suspicious and filled with anxiety.' Qiao Feng sighed and said: 'In the end, what's the identity of this master in black? I don't know it either. Perhaps if I heard you talking through your hat, I'd also half believe half doubt.'

Surprised, A'Zhu said: 'You don't know him either? Then why was he willing to risk saving you from an extremely

dangerous place? Ah, of course, every great hero who saves people in danger is just like that.'

Qiao Feng sighed and said: 'I don't know who I should take revenge on, and don't know who I should pay my debt of gratitude either. I don't know if I'm Han or Hu and don't know if in the end my conduct and deeds are right or wrong. Qiao Feng, ah Qiao Feng, you're really a man for nothing.'

Seeing his miserable expression, A'Zhu could not help putting out her hands and holding his hands. She soothed him: 'Great Master Qiao, why do you have to make yourself suffer? There'll be one day when everything will come to light. As long as you have a clear conscience, and act and behave according to the law of Heaven and Earth, that's good enough.'

Qiao Feng said: 'But I myself have a guilty conscience. Because of it I feel very sorry. That day in the apricot forest I flicked the saber and took a vow that I'd never kill a Han, but... but...'

A'Zhu said: 'At Juxian Manor, those people disregarded rights and wrongs to jointly attack you, if you hadn't struck back, could it be that you'd have confusedly let them cut you into seventeen or twenty eight pieces? There's no such thing under heaven!'

Qiao Feng said: 'You're right.' He was a broad-minded brave man therefore he only felt grieved and lonely for a limited time; after a while, he cast these feelings aside and said: 'Zhiguang dashi and Zhao Qiansun both said there were words written on this stone wall, but someone has scraped them off.'

A'Zhu said: 'Yes, I guessed you'd definitely go out of Yanmen Pass to see the words left behind on this stone wall, that's why after I escaped from danger I went here immediately to wait for you.'

Qiao Feng asked: 'How could you escape? It's also Elder Bai who saved you?' A'Zhu smiled: 'No, it isn't. You remember that I once disguised as a Shaolin monk, right?

Even his shixiongdi (apprentice younger and older bros) couldn't discover it.' Qiao Feng said: 'Yes, this mischievous skill of yours is really good.' A'Zhu said: 'That day, when the condition of my injury was already very good, Divine Doctor Xue said there was no need to treat the injury anymore and after resting for seven or eight days I'd fully recover. The stories I made up gradually had more and more flaws. Also, I already got somewhat bored with making them up and was worried about you, so in the evening of that day, I disguised as a person.' Qiao Feng asked: 'Disguised again? Who did you disguise as?'

A'Zhu said: 'I disguised as Divine Doctor Xue.'

Slightly startled, Qiao Feng said: 'How could you disguise as Divine Doctor Xue?' A'Zhu said: 'He met me every day and talked to me the most so I was familiar with his appearance and manner the most. Besides, he often stayed with me alone. In the evening of that day, I pretended to fall in a faint. He came to feel my pulse. I then turned my hand over and grabbed the inner surface of his wrist. He could no longer move, and had no choice but to let me arrange.'

Qiao Feng could not help but burst out laughing and thought: 'This Divine Doctor Xue only focused on treating illness. He didn't expect to be fooled by this imp at all.'

A'Zhu said: 'I blocked his acupuncture points, removed his clothes and footwear. As my acupuncture point blocking skill isn't first-class, I feared he would unblock the acupuncture points, so I tore the bed sheet, tied up his limbs then put him on the bed and used the quilt to cover him. If someone looked in from outside the window, they'd only think that I was sleeping deeply with my head covered by the quilt. No one would suspect. After I put on his clothes, shoes and hat and piled wrinkles onto my face, I already looked seventy percent similar to him, but I lacked a beard.'

Qiao Feng said: 'Oh, Divine Doctor Xue's beard is half black half white, it's not easy to fake it.' A'Zhu said: 'It was impossible to make a copy, so in the end I used the real

one.' Qiao Feng asked in surprise: 'The real one?' A'Zhu said: 'Yes, the real one. I took out a small knife from his medicine chest and shaved off his beard, then stuck every single thread on my face. There wasn't the slightest difference in color and appearance. Divine Doctor Xue must've been extremely angry, but what could he do? Treating my injury wasn't his true goal so me shaving off his beard doesn't count as requiting kindness with enmity, let alone the fact that after having his beard shaved off, it seemed he became younger by more than ten years, looking very handsome.'

As she spoke to here, the two of them looked at each other and burst out laughing.

A'Zhu continued after she finished laughing: 'After disguising as Divine Doctor Xue, I swaggered out of Juxian Manor. Of course no one dared to ask me anything. I asked people to prepare horse and take silver for me then went off. When I was thirty li (0.5 km) away from the manor, I pulled off the beard and changed into a young guy. Those people must have discovered it no sooner than the early morning of the next day. But on the way I already changed my appearance, they certainly wouldn't be able to find me.'

Qiao Feng applauded and said: 'Brilliant! Brilliant!' Suddenly he recalled that at Shaolin Monastery when seeing his own back in the copper mirror in the Bodhi Institute he had been dumbfounded and vaguely felt uneasy about something. At this moment, when he heard her talking about how she had disguised and escaped from danger, not only did this uneasy feeling suddenly emerge again, but it was also more intense than it had been that day at Shaolin Monastery. He considered and said: 'You turn around for me.' A'Zhu did not understand what his intention was but she still turned around.

Qiao Feng considered for a long while then took off his coat and wrapped it around her body.

Blushed, A'Zhu turned her head around, looked at him affectionately and said: 'I'm not cold.'

When Qiao Feng saw her being wrapped in his coat, his mind suddenly became clear. He turned his hand over, grabbed her wrist and said sternly: 'It turns out to be you! Who incited you? Quickly tell me.' A'Zhu was frightened and said in a trembling voice: 'Great Master Qiao, what's the matter?' Qiao Feng said: 'You once disguised as me and pretended to be me, right?'

It turned out in this moment he suddenly recalled that day in Wuxi when he had been rushing to rescue his Beggar Society brothers, he had seen the back of a person on the road. At that moment, he had not taken notice of it, but when seeing his own back in the copper mirror in the Bodhi Institute, he had started to vaguely remember that the back of that man and his own back had looked exactly alike. As a result, that uneasy feeling had emerged. But he had been confused and totally had not known the cause of it.

That day when he had rushed to rescue the Beggar Society's extraordinary people, by the time of his arrival, everyone had already escaped from danger and all of them had said they had met him not long ago. Even though he had denied that, no one had believed him. At that time, he had been baffled and thought there had been no reason for it other than someone imitating him; but if someone had wanted to imitate him to the extent that the people who had met him on a day-to-day basis such as Bai Shijing and Elder Wu had not been able to discover it, would it not be easier said than done? This moment, as soon as he saw the back of A'Zhu who was being wrapped in his coat, everything from beginning to end was confirmed further and he immediately understood. Even though A'Zhu was not having cotton padding on her body, and her small delicate back was very different than his majestic appearance, but if there were to be someone to imitate him and fool the Beggar Society people, aside from her, who else under heaven could?

A'Zhu did not panic at all. She giggled and said: 'Okay, I have no choice but to confess.' Then she told him how she disguised as him and saved the Beggar Society people using the antidote.

Qiao Feng let go of her wrist and said sternly: 'You disguised as me and saved people, what was your intention?'

A'Zhu was very surprised and said: 'I just wanted to play a joke. You saved me and A'Bi from the hands of the Western Xia people so both of us are very grateful to you. Seeing those beggars treat you badly like that, I thought if I disguised as you and cured them of the poison, making them feel ashamed, it would be a good thing.' She let out a sigh and continued: 'But who could have known at Juxian Manor they were still so cruel to you and didn't remember anything about the kindness and friendship of the past?'

Qiao Feng's expression became grimmer and grimmer. He gnashed his teeth and asked: 'Then why did you disguise as me and kill my parents? Why did you sneak in Shaolin Monastery and kill my master?'

A'Zhu jumped out of her skin and called out: 'There's no such thing. Who said I killed your parents, and killed your master?'

Qiao Feng said: 'My master was injured by someone. As he saw me, he immediately said that it was me who had harmed him. Don't tell me that it still wasn't you?' As he said to her, he slightly raised his right palm and his face was covered with a murderous look. If her answer was just a little bit clumsy, this palm would strike down, and then, even ten A'Zhu's would die violently in an instant.

Seeing that his face was covered with a murderous look and his eyes were filled with rage, A'Zhu was extremely scared and could not help taking two steps backward. If she took another two steps backward, she would fall into the bottomless abyss.

Qiao Feng said sternly: 'Stand there, don't move!'

A'Zhu was so frightened that tears rolled down her cheeks drop by drop. She quavered: 'I didn't... I didn't kill your parents, and didn't... didn't kill your master. Your master had such great... great skills, how could I kill him?'

Her last sentence was very powerful. As soon as Qiao Feng heard it, he slightly shivered and knew that he had wrongly blamed her. He put out his left hand with lightning speed, grabbed her shoulder and pulled her close to the cliff so that she would not slip and fall into the ravine. He said: 'That's right. My master wasn't killed by you.' His master Xuan Ku dashi was a brother of high-level monks such as Xuan Ci, Xuan Ji and Xuan Nan; his martial arts attainments were first-class nowadays. He passed away not because of being poisoned or being injured by weapons or missiles, but because his inner organs had been crushed by extremely fierce palm force. A'Zhu was very young, how could she have such profound internal energy? Had her internal energy been sufficient to strike dead Xuan Ku dashi, then that Great Diamond Palm attack by Xuan Ci would not have been able to strike her near dead.

A'Zhu smiled through tears, tapped herself on the chest and said: 'You almost scared me to death. Your words were very unreasonable. If I had the ability to kill your master, then why didn't I help you massacre those bad eggs at Juxian Manor?'

Seeing that she was slightly angry, Qiao Feng felt regretful and said: 'Recently, I've been in a doubtful mood so I just talked nonsense, please don't blame me.'

A'Zhu smiled and said: 'Who blames you? If I blamed you then I wouldn't talk to you.' Then she immediately stopped smiling and said softly: 'Great Master Qiao, no matter how you treat me, in this life, I'll never be angry with you.'

Qiao Feng shook his head and said indifferently: 'Even though I saved you, you don't need to keep it in mind.' He frowned, entranced, then suddenly asked: 'A'Zhu, who taught you these disguising and making-up skills? Does

your master have any other disciple?' A'Zhu shook her head and said: 'Nobody taught me. Since childhood I've liked to disguise as other people to play. The more I imitated, the better I could disguise. And I don't have any master. Could it be that I must have a master in order to play a game?'

Qiao Feng let out a sigh and said: 'Then this really is strange. Who could expect that in the world there's one man who looks exactly like me, to such an extent that my master mistook him for me?' A'Zhu said: 'Because there is this clue, it'd be easy. We just need to find this man, then torture and force him to answer.' Qiao Feng said: 'Correct. But it's extremely difficult to find one man in the boundless sea of people in the world. He probably also has good disguising and making-up skills like you do.'

He came near the cliff and gazed at the marks caused by axes and chisels on the stone wall, wanting to find out what words had been carved on it originally. But after looking at them carefully, he still could not recognize a single word. He said: 'I must find Zhiguang dashi and ask him what words were written on this stone wall. If I can't bring this matter to light, I won't be able to eat and sleep calmly.'

A'Zhu said: 'I'm afraid he won't be willing to say.' Qiao Feng said: 'He'll probably be unwilling to say, but I'll force and beg him. Only after he says will I stop.' A'Zhu muttered: 'Zhiguang dashi seems to be very resolute and unafraid of death. Perhaps forcing and begging him wouldn't work. It'd be better...' Qiao Feng nodded and said: 'Correct. It'd be better to ask Zhao Qiansun. Oh, probably this Zhao Qiansun guy would rather die than submit as well. But I already have a way to deal with him.'

As he spoke to here, he turned toward one side, looked at the abyss and said: 'I wanna go down to have a look.' A'Zhu jumped in fright. She looked at the mouth of that valley which was covered in clouds and mists and took several steps away from it for fear of carelessly falling down into it. She then said: 'No, no! You must not go down. What's good

to see down there?' Qiao Feng said: 'In the end am I Han or Hu? This matter has always been whirling around my head. I wanna go down to investigate and clear it up, and to take a look at the corpse of that Khitan man.' A'Zhu said: 'It's been thirty years since that man fell down. There're only several pieces of white bones left. What else will you be able to see?' Qiao Feng said: 'I just wanna have a look at that man's remains. I think if he's really my real father then I should collect his bones, bring them up and bury them properly.'

A'Zhu screamed: 'Impossible, impossible! You're benevolent, heroic and righteous. How can you be a descendant of the inhuman vicious Khitans?'

Qiao Feng said: 'You wait for me here for one day and one night. If by this time tomorrow I haven't gone up then you won't need to wait anymore.'

Very worried, A'Zhu burst into tears and called out: 'Great Master Qiao, please don't go down!'

Qiao Feng's intention was very firm. In spite of A'Zhu, he did not change his mind a little bit. He said: 'At Juxian Manor, so many heroes and brave men couldn't kill me. Don't tell me that this trifling valley could take my life?'

Unable to think of any word to dissuade him, A'Zhu had no choice but to say: 'Maybe there're very many poisonous snakes, poisonous insects or ferocious monsters down there.'

'Ha-ha,' Qiao Feng laughed out loud, patted her shoulder and said: 'If there were monsters then it couldn't be better. I'd capture them for you to play.' He looked all around the mouth of the valley to find a cliff where he could manage to put his feet on to gradually climb down.

At this moment, suddenly he vaguely heard the sounds of horse hooves which were galloping southward in the northeast corner. Judging by the sounds, there were more than twenty horses. Without delay, Qiao Feng quickly walked back to the mountain slope and looked in the direction of the horse hoofbeats. From a height, he saw that they were more than twenty cavalymen wearing yellow

clothes and armor. All of them were Great Song's servicemen. They were arranged in a line and coming quickly along the mountain path on the high slope below.

After seeing clearly those people, he paid no attention to them. But the place where he and A'Zhu were staying at was on the important path to enter the pass from the north of the Great Wall; that year, extraordinary people of Central Plains had selected this place to ambush the Khitan warriors for this reason. He thought because this place was a strategic point for frontier defense, if Great Song servicemen saw unfamiliar people here, they would likely interrogate and examine; hence it would be better to stay away from them to avoid troubles. He then returned to the original place, pulled A'Zhu to the back of the big rock to hide and said: 'These are Great Song servicemen!'

Not long after that, those more than twenty cavalrymen went up the ridge. Hiding behind the rock, Qiao Feng already saw that the leading person was an officer. He could not refrain from feeling rather moved: 'That year, people such as Chief Wang, Zhiguang dashi and Zhao Qiansun proly also ambushed behind this big rock, and in this way they saw the Khitan warriors going up the ridge. Today, the peak and the rock are still the same, but most of the warriors of both sides Song and Liao that year have turned into white bones.'

While his mind was wandering, suddenly he heard several crying sounds of children. Qiao Feng was astonished and felt as if he was in dreamland: 'Why are there also children?' After that he heard the screams of several women.

He stuck his head out and saw clearly that most of those Great Song servicemen were having a kidnapped woman on each of their horses. All of the women and children were wearing Khitan pastoral attire. Quite a few Great Song servicemen stretched out their hands and groped the Khitan women, looking extremely licentious and repulsive. Some women who resisted were immediately shouted abuse at

and hit by those servicemen. Qiao Feng found this strange and did not understand the reason for this. He saw that after passing by the big rock, these people galloping straight towards Yanmen Pass.

A'Zhu asked: 'Great Master Qiao, what are they doing?' Qiao Feng shook his head and thought: 'Why are defending troops at this frontier pass so obscene?' A'Zhu continued: 'This kind of serviceman looks just like bandits.'

After that, more than thirty other servicemen went up the ridge, driving along several hundreds head of cattle and sheep and more than ten Khitan women. He heard one officer say: 'Gathering crops this time, our harvest isn't very good, I wonder if commander-in-chief will get angry?' Another officer said: 'We couldn't snatch a lot of cattle and sheep from Liao dogs, but two or three women among the ones we snatched look not bad. Let commander-in-chief enjoy them, he'll be in a good mood.' The first officer said: 'Thirty something women aren't enough for everyone. Tomorrow we should work hard and snatch some more.' A soldier laughed and said: 'Hearing the rumors, all the Liao dogs must've already run away. If we wanna gather crops again, we need to wait for two or three months.'

Hearing to here, Qiao Feng could not refrain from getting extremely furious. He thought that the misdeeds of these servicemen were even worse than those of the most despicable robbers.

Suddenly, a baby who was being carried in the bosom of a Khitan woman started to cry loudly. That Khitan woman held out her hand and pushed away the hand of a Great Song officer then turned her head back to coax the crying baby. That officer was very angry. He grabbed that baby and threw him on the ground. After that he urged the horse forwards; the horse trampled on the body of the baby, immediately breaking his belly and making his intestines stick out. That Khitan woman was so frightened that she was

stunned and unable to let out any sound of crying. The servicemen laughed loudly and passed by in large numbers.

In his life, Qiao Feng had seen not just a few ruthless cruel things, but this was the first time he had seen someone openly kill a baby for fun like this. He was extremely furious but did not unleash his feelings right away as he wanted to see the whole story.

After this group of servicemen passed by, more than ten other servicemen came while shouting. All of these Great Song servicemen were riding horses and holding high spears in their hands. The head of almost every spear was piercing through one gory severed head. There was a long rope fastened to the tail of one of the horses, tying up five Khitan men. Qiao Feng saw that those people were wearing clothes of ordinary herdsmen. Two of them were very old with their heads full of white hairs. The other three were fifteen or sixteen year old youngsters. He immediately understood that these Great Song servicemen had gone out to pillage, all the strong Khitan herdsmen had escaped but they had captured the women, the children, the old and the weak.

He heard one officer laugh and say: 'Cutting off fourteen heads and capturing five Liao dogs, this contribution is not big and not small, but I'll certainly be promoted by one rank and rewarded with one hundred taels of silver.' Another man said: 'Hey Gao, there's a Khitan small town fifty li to the west of here. Do you dare to go there to gather crops?' The one called Gao said: 'Why the heck do I not dare? Are you looking down on me for being a rookie? As a rookie, your father needs to make more contributions at the frontier.' While they were talking, the line of men, who were running fast, already came near the big rock.

When seeing the corpse of the child on the ground, one old Khitan man suddenly screamed out, rushed over to hug the corpse, repeatedly kissed it and cried out sorrowfully. Even though Qiao Feng did not understand this old man's

language, seeing his expression, he knew that the baby who had been trampled to death by horses was his relative. The private who was dragging the old man continuously pulled the rope, urging him to go fast. Getting furious like crazy, that old Khitan man fiercely rushed at him. Frightened, that private brandished his saber and quickly slashed at the old man. The old Khitan man exerted his strength and gave him a pull, dragging him down from horseback, then opened his mouth and bit the private's neck. At this moment, another Great Song officer on horseback ruthlessly chopped at the back of the old man with his saber one time then he stooped down, grabbed his neck and pulled him away. Only now was the private who had fallen on the ground able to stand up. He was very angry therefore he brandished his saber and chopped several more times at the old Khitan man. That old man shook a few times but he did not tumble down. The servicemen, either raising spears or lifting long sabers, then surrounded him.

That old man turned towards the north, unfastened the clothes on the upper part of his body, stood upright and suddenly started to cry out loudly in a grieved voice, sounding like the howl of a wolf. Temporarily, the servicemen all had a frightened expression on their faces.

Qiao Feng was scared. He suddenly felt that there seemed to be a spiritual connection between him and this old Khitan man. He himself had also let out these several howls which sounded like those of a dying wolf's. That had been at Juxian Manor, after successively being hit by saber and spear, seeing Shan Zheng thrusting at him with his saber, he himself had known that he had been about to die, hence he had been unable to hold back his grief and indignation and cried out violently like a wild beast.

At this moment, when he heard those cries, a sense of closeness involuntarily arose in his heart. Not thinking anymore, he leaped out from the behind the big rock,

grabbed those Great Song servicemen and threw them off the cliff one by one. The more Qiao Feng fought, the more ardent he became. He even shoved all the horses that they rode down the ravine by giving each horse one palm attack. The cries by men and the neighs by horses were heard for a while then soon fell silent.

A'Zhu and those four Khitan men were dumbfounded when they saw that he was such miraculously mighty.

After killing all of those more than ten servicemen, Qiao Feng let out a long howl which shook the valley. Seeing that the old Khitan man was still standing upright after receiving several saber slashes, he respected him for being a brave man. He then went up to the old man and saw that he was facing north with his bare chest being exposed, but he no longer breathed and was already dead. As soon as Qiao Feng looked at the old man's chest, 'Ah,' he uttered an exclamation and took one step backwards, his body tottered as if he was about to fall over.

A'Zhu was very scared. She called out: 'Great Master Qiao, you... you... are you alright?' Only chi-chi-chi sounds were heard, Qiao Feng had ripped open the clothes that covered his own front, showing a hairy chest.

A'Zhu immediately saw that there was a decorative design tattooed on his chest, which was a blue wolf head with its mouth wide opened showing its teeth, looking ferocious. When she looked at the old Khitan man again, she saw that his chest also had a wolf head tattoo whose appearance was exactly the same as that of the wolf head on Qiao Feng's chest.

Suddenly, those four Khitan men started to shout at the same time.

When Qiao Feng had begun to understand things at the age of two or three, he had already seen this blue wolf head tattoo on his chest. Because he had known it since childhood, he had not in the least thought that it had been unusual. Later, when he had grown up, he had asked his

parents about it. Qiao Sanhuai and his wife both had said that the picture had been beautiful and praised it for a while, but they had said nothing about its origin. During the Northern Song Dynasty, it was very common to have a tattoo on the body; some people even had their whole bodies covered with tattoos from the neck to the feet. Great Song received the country from the Chai clan of the Later Zhou Dynasty. The founder of the Later Zhou Dynasty Guo Wei had a sparrow tattoo on his neck, and for this reason he was called 'Guo Sparrow.' At that time, having tattoos had become a prevailing fashion and eight or nine tenth of the Beggar Society brothers had tattoos on their bodies, hence Qiao Feng had never had the least bit of suspicion. But at this moment, when he saw that the blue wolf tattoo on the chest of the dead old Khitan man and his own tattoo were amazingly exactly alike, he was extremely shocked.

The four Khitan people surrounded him and talked in a language he did not understand. They continuously pointed at the wolf head on his chest. Because Qiao Feng did not understand what they were saying, he had no idea how to reply. Suddenly one old man unfastened his clothes and showed his chest, which amazingly also had this wolf head tattoo. The other three youngsters also unfastened their clothes, and their chests all had the wolf head tattoo as well.

In an instant, Qiao Feng finally knew absolutely that he himself was a Khitan. The wolf head on the chest had to be the symbol of their tribe, perhaps each of them had been tattooed with it since childhood. He had always detested Khitan people, thinking that they were brutal, despicable, faithless and unrighteous, and thinking that they were accustomed to killing Han people and did not stop at any crime. But at this moment he had no choice but to admit that he himself was a Khitan man who was just like an animal, hence he felt extremely distressed.

He stood in a trance for a long time then suddenly he let out a shout and ran like crazy towards the forest.

A'Zhu called out: 'Great Master Qiao, Great Master Qiao!' and went after him.

Only after chasing him for more than ten li (0.5 km) did A'Zhu see him sitting under a big tree and hugging his head. His face was very pale, a thick blue vein stuck out on his forehead. A'Zhu went to his side and sat down next to him.

Qiao Feng shrank his body and said: 'I'm a Khitan barbarian who is lower than pigs and dogs. From now on, you don't need to see me again.'

Like all other Han people, A'Zhu of course also detested Khitan people to the marrow, but in her heart, Qiao Feng was like a heavenly god. Needless to say, he was just a Khitan. Even if he was a demon or a ferocious beast, she would not be willing to leave him. She thought: 'He's unhappy now. I must nicely advise and console him.' She then softly said: 'There're good ones and bad ones among Han people, so naturally there're also good ones and bad ones among Khitan people. Great Master Qiao, please don't pay attention to this kind of thing. A'Zhu's life was saved by you. If you're Han, that's fine by me. If you're Khitan, that's also fine. Han or Khitan, it makes no difference to me.'

Qiao Feng coldly said: 'I don't need you to take pity on me. In your mind, you look down on me. You don't need to hypocritically say any nice word. I saved your life not because of my true feelings. It's just that I temporarily wanted to show off my skills and defeat other people. This matter has been written off in one stroke. Please go away quickly.'

A'Zhu was anxious and flustered and thought: 'He already knows that he himself is a Khitan barbarian. Perhaps he'll return to the northern deserts and from now on never put his foot on Central Plains again.' For the moment, not being able to control her feelings, she stood up and said: 'Great Master Qiao, if you cast me aside and leave, I'll jump into this valley. A'Zhu will definitely do what she has

promised. You're a Khitan hero so you look down on this lowly slave girl. I'd better finish myself.'

Hearing she says very sincerely, Qiao Feng felt touched. He had only thought that if he was a barbarian, all the Han people under heaven would avoid him like avoiding snakes and scorpions. Never could he have expected that A'Zhu still treated him the same as before, hence he could not help holding out his hand to pull her hand and said gently: 'A'Zhu, you're Mr. Murong's maid, and not my maid. I... How can I look down on you?'

A'Zhu said: 'I don't need you to take pity on me. In your mind, you look down on me. You don't need to hypocritically say any nice word.' She imitated these few sentences of Qiao Feng and there was no dissimilarity between her voice and tone to those of his, but her eyes were filled with a mischievous look.

Qiao Feng ha-ha laughed out loud. He was on the edge of despair and disappointment, therefore when he was joked with and consoled by this smart young girl he could not help feeling that his worries had largely disappeared.

A'Zhu suddenly adopted a stern expression and said: 'Great Master Qiao, I serve Mr. Murong but I do not sell myself to him. It was only because I have been without parents since childhood and was wandering about outside, one day I was bullied and humiliated by other people, seeing that, Old Master Murong saved me and took me to his home. I was alone and homeless so I became a maid in his home. Actually Mr. Murong doesn't regard me as his maid at all. He even bought a few maids to serve me. A'Bi meizi (younger sister) is also like me. It's just that her father sent her to Old Master Murong's home in Yanzi hamlet (Yanzi = Swallow - bird) to take refuge. In those days, Old Master Murong and Madame Murong once said that the day I and A'Bi wanted to leave Yanzi hamlet, his Murong family would happily see us off...' Saying to here, she slightly blushed. It turned out during that time Madame Murong had said: 'The

days that the two little girls A'Zhu and A'Bi have homes to return to, the whole Murong family will see them off with dowries, decorated sedan chairs and musical performances. There'll be no difference to when our daughter gets married.' She paused for a short while then continued talking to Qiao Feng: 'From now on, I'm gonna serve you and become your maid. Mr. Murong definitely won't take offense.'

Shaking his hands continuously, Qiao Feng said: 'No, no! I'm a barbaric Hu man, how can I have any maid? You're used to living in a rich and honorable family in Jiangnan, what's so good about following me to wander about and suffer hardships? You see, I'm such an insolent sort of fellow, do I deserve to be served by you?'

A'Zhu gave a charming smile and said: 'If so, let's consider that I'm a servant who has been captured by you, when you're happy you'll smile at me, when you're sad you'll beat me and scold me, is that okay?' Qiao Feng smiled and said: 'If I gave you a punch, I'm afraid you'd die instantly.' A'Zhu said: 'Of course you only beat me gently and must not hit too hard.' Qiao Feng laughed ha-ha and said: 'If beating gently then it'd be better not to beat. I don't wanna have any servant either.' A'Zhu said: 'You're a great Khitan hero, what's wrong with you capturing some Han women and making them your servants? You see, didn't those Great Song servicemen also kidnap many Khitan people?'

Qiao Feng was speechless. Seeing that he was knitting his brows tightly and the look in his eyes was very gloomy, A'Zhu was afraid that she had said something wrong making him unhappy.

After a while, Qiao Feng slowly said: 'I've always thought that Khitan people are ferocious and ruthless, and savagely harm Han people. But today I've seen with my own eyes how Great Song servicemen killed Khitan people regardless of age and sex. I... I... A'Zhu, I'm a Khitan. From now on, I'm no

longer ashamed to be a Khitan, and I don't feel honored to be a Great Song man either.'

Hearing him say so, A'Zhu knew that he had untied this knot of depression in his mind. She was very happy and said: 'I already said there're good ones and bad ones among Hu people, and there're also the good and the bad among Han people. Hu people don't have the craftiness of Han people's so maybe they even have a bit fewer baddies.'

When Qiao Feng looked at the ravine on the left-hand side, he remembered what had happened that year and said: 'A'Zhu, my father and mother were murdered without any reason by these Han people. I'm not allowed not to settle this score.'

A'Zhu nodded and secretly felt scared. She knew that the words 'I'm not allowed not to settle this score' that he had just mentioned lightly were bound to involve countless fierce battles, blood and lives.

Qiao Feng pointed at the ravine and said: 'That year, after my mother was killed by them, my father was so sad that he didn't wanna live, so he jumped into the ravine from beside the rock over there. While he was in mid-air, unwilling to make me die with him, he tossed me up. Only thanks to that can Qiao Feng be here today. A'Zhu, my father loved me very much, didn't he?' With her eyes moistened with tears, A'Zhu said: 'Yes.'

Qiao Feng said: 'My parents' intense and deep-seated score, how can I not settle it? In the past I didn't know about it so I went as far as considering the enemies my friends. It was very unfilial of me to do so. Today, if I don't find and kill the main murderer that harmed my parents, how could I, Qiao, still have the face to live in the world? In the end, who is the 'leading big brother' that they mentioned? The letter that he wrote to Chief Wang had his signature, but monk Zhiguang tore off the signature and swallowed it. Obviously this 'leading big brother' buster is still alive, otherwise they wouldn't have to cover up for him.'

He asked himself and answered himself. After thinking deeply, he knew that A'Zhu was unable to help him find the archenemy but having one person at his side to hear him talk would automatically relieve many of his worries. He continued: 'This leading big brother buster could command the extraordinary people of Central Plains so he must be a person with very good martial arts and high reputation. Judging by his tone in the letter, the friendship between him and Chief Wang is very unusual. He called Chief Wang elder brother, so he must be a bit younger than Chief Wang, but of course he's much older than me. It shouldn't be hard to find a person like this at all. Alas, only monk Zhiguang, Elder Xu and Madam Ma of the Beggar Society, and Impartial Judge Shan Zheng have read that letter. That Zhao Qiansun guy certainly also knows who he is. Zhao Qiansun already told his shimei (younger apprentice sister) Granny Tan about that. Perhaps Granny Tan doesn't hide that from her husband. Both monk Zhiguang and Zhao Qiansun are accomplices in the murders of my parents so I'll certainly kill them. As for this 'leading big brother' mofo, humph, I... I will kill his whole family from the old to the young, and won't spare even fowls and dogs!'

A'Zhu felt a shiver of fear. She wanted to say: 'Killing that leading villain would already be enough. You spare his whole family, ok?' But when she was about to say these sentences, she did not dare to open her lips. She only felt that Qiao Feng had intense might therefore she did not in the least dare to refuse to follow him.

Qiao Feng continued: 'Monk Zhiguang wanders about the whole country. Zhao Qiansun also roams around. It won't be easy to find these two people. That Impartial Judge Shan Zheng guy didn't take part in the battle that killed my parents. I already killed two of his sons, his youngest son also died because of me, so there's no need to find him anymore. A'Zhu, let's go find Elder Xu of the Beggar Society.'

Hearing him say the word 'let's' A'Zhu could not help feeling elated because it meant that he agreed to let her go with him. She smiled charmingly and thought: 'Even if it's going to the ends of the world, I'll still go with you.'

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